HOW A GAME LIVES

The Annotated Essays of Jacob Geller

CONTENTS

CAN'T STOP THINKING

By Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

Jacob Geller can't stop thinking.

I know this partially because it's a refrain that often appears in his work. I first noticed it in an afternoon of discovery, when I absorbed this stranger's ideas about massacre-minded school architecture, digital representations of infinity, and the existential quandary in a game where you play as a flopping fish.

I know that Jacob is thinking. He says it often, though not in a way that's been trademarked or repeated ad nauseum to serve the higher power of some algorithm. He says it in a way that sets up his viewers on YouTube or Nebula or wherever, those millions of us who have discovered him and enrolled in the fandom, to be primed for an experience. He might say,

"X continued unabated in my head for years…." or "I think about X a lot," or maybe, "X has taken up space in my brain for years."

And it's a beautiful linguistic hallmark, a telltale sign of some excitement to come — like Bruce Wayne pushing away from a restaurant dinner table before the entrees have even settled because "Something came up."

NANA KWAME ADJEI-BRENYAH
(he/him)

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah was raised in Spring Valley, New York, and now lives in the Bronx. His debut collection, *Friday Black*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and won the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. His first novel *Chain-Gang All-Stars* was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction and a *New York Times* top ten book of the year.

"Jacob infects us with thought, with thoughtfulness."

Jacob tells us he can't stop thinking and it's almost a warning. I know that not just because he says so; I've felt it. It's contagious. Jacob infects us with thought, with thoughtfulness.

Full Disclosure: if you haven't guessed, I'm a fan of Jacob. And I arrived solidly in this place in a particular way. I am a proud member of the Geller canon; that is to say, one of my stories, "Through the Flash," was used as a kind of linchpin in an essay titled "Time Loop Nihilism." The essay thought about *Deathloop* and several other pop culture representations of time loops and how they try and sometimes fail to wrestle with important questions. What makes tomorrow tomorrow? Where do we carry regret, shame? And more precisely, if you did a bunch of fucked up violent things today, but tomorrow those people you harmed were physically healed, how much would that matter? My thought is it would matter a lot.

I remember watching this guy talking about my story, citing the context and tradition it emerged from, and thinking, "Holy shit, he got it." I felt completely understood as a writer and artist. I felt genuinely moved by another artist's willingness to *really* think about my work. I felt like someone saw what I was trying to parse, someone understood the gap I was trying to fill.

I think it's part of Jacob's superpower: an uncanny ability to see what art or physical spaces or digital spaces are attempting to do. He also sees their influences and thinks through what his subjects are in literal or spiritual conversation with. He can see the soul and shadow of Thing X in Thing Y. Like for example how he was able to connect *Deathloop* and *Groundhog Day* with a brutal story by a lesser-known author about a day that ends in nuclear obliteration. He connects games and literature often because if you pay attention to the work he's presenting, it's impossible not to see that games *are* literature.

Geller can't stop taking art seriously. He can't stop believing there is something transcendent to be found in Rothko or Zelda's darkness or the human fear of the sea. He can't stop resisting what so many aspects of our entertainment beg us

to do: Let your mind slide gently over those inconsistencies, plot holes, boring bits. Just go with it, so much of our media is begging. Screaming at us, "4K highspeed blah blah frames per second." So many of our stories are presented to us as if fidelity was the same as truth.

Geller sees through this. He's vigilant, and it means that his stamp of consideration means something.

In the video essay version of "The Future of Writing About Games" (page 174), Jacob exclaims with joy how it felt reading the work of Peter Eliot, who presented an idea about the malicious feelings of the castles in *ICO*.

"Half of my dang library of work is talking about the idea of hostile architecture," Geller writes. He almost yells this, excited to remember an early inspiration.

Even before he became who he would become, Jacob loved seeing shadows of his future self in Peter Eliot, a person willing to think about the games he was playing thoroughly. Think about them and write hundreds of pages about how and why exploring a castle with a young boy and girl in *ICO* could sow electricity into the hearts of gamers like you and me.

It's too simple though to say Jacob makes me and his millions of subscribers feel "seen." Though he does, and there is a particular pleasure when a game you've already played is featured in one of his pieces. Truly, it's a special thing to have an experience reborn from the melding of your memory and his insight.

But what's even more beautiful, in my humble opinion, is an adjacent experience. I turn on a Jacob video about… let's stay with the games writing one, and as I'm fully entrenched in mind-stretching examples of the nature of the initial subject the video will leap in its scope and argument.

Suddenly we're in an interrogation of both the philosophical reality and potential of Preview and Review. He then describes a short review of a game that brilliantly transforms and grows each time you read it. He makes me feel like I'm reading what he is describing while he

"When I take in Geller's work I am asked to be thrilled, exhumed, obliterated by the wonder this world and its art might offer."

simultaneously considers a myriad of contextual beats, demonstrating an important truth: no art is made in a vacuum. All art echoes and ripples through the world that bore it.

Next, he moves to a moment. A moment we all know: the feeling of emptiness that comes with the end of a game. The end of a book. The "end" of an anything. A feeling that as an artist and gamer, I'm hyper-aware of. How can I make this accumulate and end in a… something? How will I feel when the credits roll?

Jacob says here that part of his idea of criticism is that it fills that void that erupts from completion. Making and reading criticism is a new life, one we can give ourselves. By thinking, we renew what was a death and if we do so with enough generosity and vigor, we might approach a kind of transcendence. I read reviews, and have on some level, been indoctrinated by that good/bad or buy/don't buy simplicity that has bruised all our brains. But a part of me has always resisted the idea that any experience might be reduced to any number of stars.

In that same essay (Jacob's not done yet) I'm asked to consider the idea that there is a whole host of untapped potential in criticism. Things that aren't only analysis or review but much, much more. Which leads Jacob to talking about Jamil Jan Kochai's story: "Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain." And then I do something. I pause the video. I find the story. I read it. And I am transformed.

Somehow, prompted by the author of this book, the words of Kochai's short story (a form I also practice and am intimately familiar with) slide into my heart like a hot sword through thin ice. "Is Kochai my favorite writer now?" I remember thinking. I'm a literary author, and prompted by the author of this book, I was reading a piece of literary fiction that changed me. Jamil Jan Kochai was already a peer I respected greatly, but suddenly I saw him with new eyes, with new wonder.

And then, I go back to Jacob's essay. I unpause the video and feel deeply that these ideas being presented to me are

bringing me to myself. My real self. The essence that briefly shines when I am creative, or really at play, or honestly, truly being in the world, unencumbered, free. When I take in Geller's work I am being asked to be thrilled, exhumed, obliterated by the wonder this world and its art might offer.

It probably goes without saying that Jacob Geller is the Future of Writing about Video Games, but he's also the future of writing about … kind of anything?

Weird flex, but I was once interviewed by *The New York Times* about the things I like to read. One of the questions was, "Do I prefer to be stimulated emotionally or intellectually?" My answer was and is YES. I reject the dichotomy. And no writer or thinker out there reminds me I don't have to choose more than the author of this book. I don't have to choose, and neither do you.

Jacob is known for video essays. Now he has a book. It's a beautiful object and like the best books it's a transformation machine. I hope you might take this as an opportunity to be made to see anew. To be broken open. To fully think with mind and heart and whatever other important bits about… all of it. About everything, and how brutal and fun and wild it all is and might be. Jacob Geller can't stop thinking, about a lot of things. And now, because of his affliction — his gift — neither can we.

INTRODUCTION

By Jacob Geller

Fourteen years ago, on a version of the *Game Informer* website that no longer exists, I wrote my first long-form pieces on video games. On the site's then-thriving user blogs, I proudly posted my thoughts on *Dead Island, Assassin's Creed*, and whatever else we were talking about in 2011. Six years later, I started a WordPress site called *The Thirteenth Colossus*. The first thing I published there, just a couple days after my 22nd birthday, compares the slaying of one of the bosses in *Shadow of the Colossus* to the short story "The Fog Horn" by Ray Bradbury. It is almost comically on-brand, the inadvertent template for the kind of essay I'd eventually write as a career. Later, the podcast *Cane and Rinse* kindly agreed to host some of my writing on its site, and eventually I wrangled my way into an official internship at the very same *Game Informer* that once hosted my amateur writing. The month I arrived, *Game Informer* pulled the plug on those user blogs.

At the time, my focus was on audience, not permanence. No matter the host, my written pieces couldn't "break containment" — they never reached beyond the bounds of their initial audience. There was no mechanism to push blogs in front of thousands of new people, to expose them to a form of writing they didn't even know they wanted. A piece of writing couldn't be picked up by an algorithm and shown to a million eyes. Except, of course, if that piece of writing was edited into a video on YouTube.

I jumped to video because I wanted to go *viral*.

For as much as creators (myself included) curse YouTube's algorithm, its power to find new potential audiences is remarkable. My most-read pieces at *Game Informer* were impersonal listicles and news blogs. It only took a couple months on YouTube to match those audience numbers with a personal meditation on the melancholy of *Super Mario*

Galaxy. It was YouTube's algorithm that catapulted me to prominence with an essay on a hidden secret in *Shadow of the Colossus* and that algorithm (for now) continues to favor even my most esoteric topics. Is it a deeply alienating experience to surrender success to an unknowable piece of code that understands neither quality nor morality? Yep!!!!!! But that code also helped most of you find this book, and for that, I'm appreciative.

Transitioning from written essays to video also allowed me to flex more creative control over my output; music to guide the viewer's emotions, vocal tone to communicate pacing and importance, and game footage to demonstrate the exact moments I often struggle to describe. Although I first switched to video in search of greater audiences, I've grown to appreciate my video editing software as an invaluable storytelling tool and not just a toll I pay to access the magic algorithm.

Make no mistake though; *there is a toll*. When I publish a video on YouTube, I relinquish my work to a platform I cannot control, a site with ever-changing rules and priorities. A shift in copyright enforcement could remove all my videos; a hack could turn my channel into a billboard for cryptocurrency; some day in the future, the site's servers will just be turned off. This is not a foreign idea in modern media — seemingly every month, a previously-vibrant website has its archives wiped and another thousand pages of cultural thoughts, analysis, and debate are erased from our historical record. While writing this book, the entirety of *Game Informer's* website was unceremoniously shut down; decades of reviews, interviews, and more (like everything I wrote as an intern), flushed into the same non-existence as my original blogs. Every disappeared article, every piece of lost media, hurts our understanding of its subject. Simply

playing a game (or watching a movie, or reading a poem) cannot contextualize its impact. Conversation defines a piece of art's cultural legacy. This is how a game dies: when all the context of its life is stripped away.

And so, then. This book. *How a Game Lives.* A permanent collection of ten of my favorite essays I've written, an object immune to corporate takeovers, hacks, or power grid failures. In that preservationist spirit, I've stuffed it with as much context as possible — hundreds of new annotations by me on each essay, ten new afterwords by extraordinarily talented other writers, and brilliant original art that reimagines each essay's themes.

How a Game Lives is a return to my pre-YouTube, pre-audiovisual days. It will likely be read by far fewer people than watch even my least popular video. But as long as it's on someone's shelf — as long as it's on *your* shelf — the context of this art can't be erased. I care about this book very much. Please take care of it.

How Should This Book Be Read?

It's very fun to write a book without a single way of reading it.

The essays in this book have been faithfully transposed from their video counterparts — if I went back to fiddle with them, I don't think I could as meaningfully call the book a record of my work. That means the essays will often have questionable grammar and occasionally even factual errors (though I've tried to correct these in the annotations). It *also* means that the essays will sometimes refer to something shown on-screen in a way that's a little unclear through just the text — if you've never seen the original video, it may be best to start there (assuming they still exist, that is).

If you're already familiar with the essays, you can instead focus on the plethora of new annotations. Filling the margins of this book are of are **notes**[1] highlighting and examining specific parts of each essay. Writing the annotations was a joy; they feel like a conversation with a previous version of me, our back-and-forth keeping these old pieces lively. I hope they give you greater insight into how these essays were originally written, and how our relationship with old work continues to evolve.

1

Like this!

The book also allowed me to highlight previously minimized aspects of my essays. For instance, all of my essays have epigraphs, but on YouTube, they're hidden in the tiny description box, crowded alongside sponsor links. Now they can sit up front, right under the title!

But my personal favorite pages of this book are the ones I didn't write at all. Accompanying each essay is an afterword expanding on the subject of my original work in unexpected and delightful ways. These afterwords — written by authors, teachers, and journalists — are incisive and personal and academic and occasionally *deeply strange*. In each, I can see my work grow and blossom in ways I never could have imagined. It's a privilege to punctuate my essays with each of them.
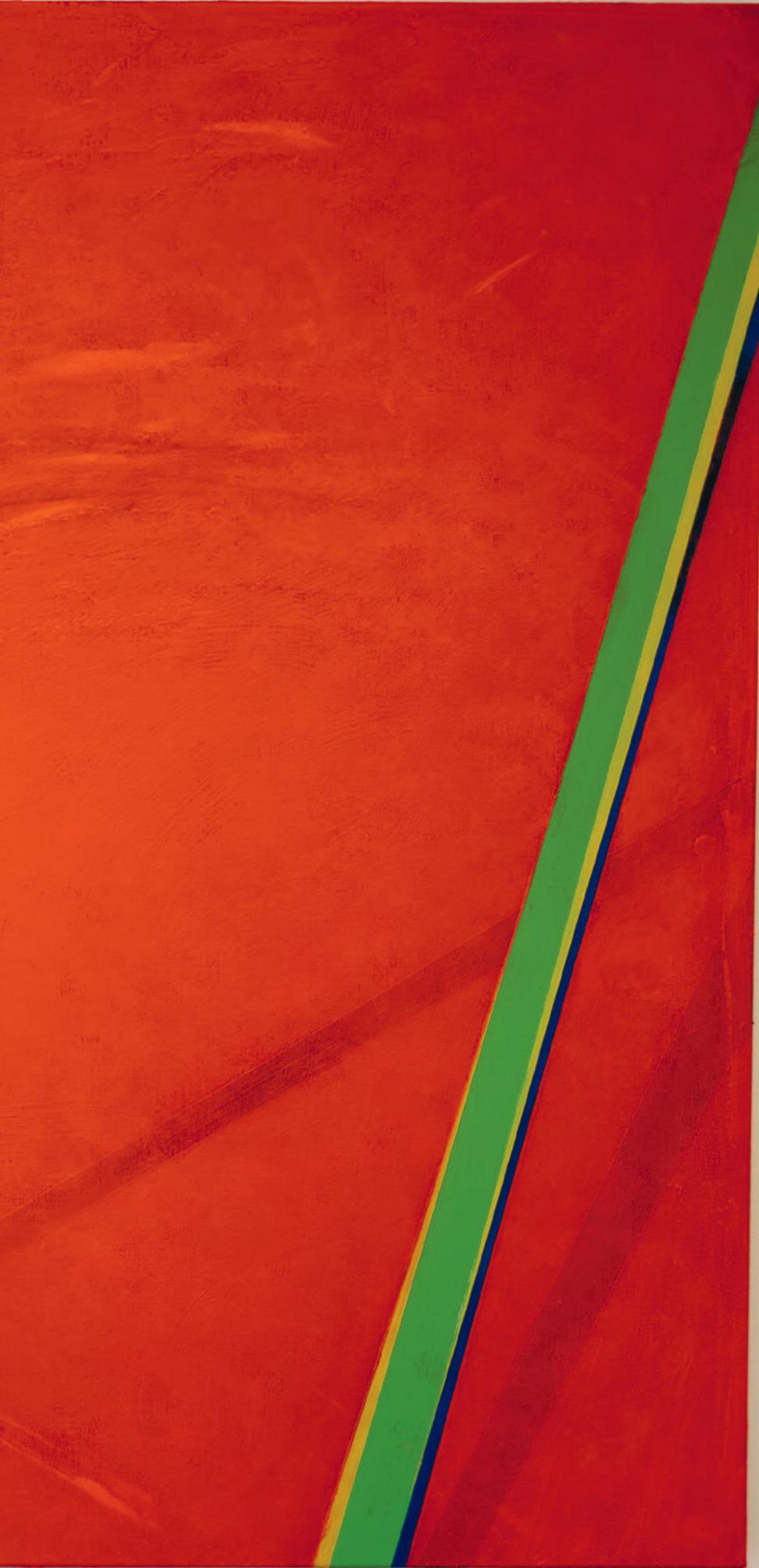
WHO'S AFRAID OF MODERN ART?

WHO'S AFRAID OF MODERN ART?

A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token...how often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent.

**Mark Rothko, 1947
"The Ideas of Art"**

1

I've never really found an opportunity to talk about it in an essay, but *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee is my single favorite play. I saw it performed in 2011 at a local theater. It's almost three hours long and viciously cruel. Albee takes four characters and gradually turns each into their own universe of pain and vulnerability; the image of George and Martha, emotionally hollowed out, leaning against each other as the stage went dark, still rattles around my brain. I have no doubt my early interest in Newman's painting was due to the overt reference to the play.

After the painting was attacked, the connection between the play and canvas retroactively seems almost on-the-nose; both artworks now stand as monuments to human cruelty. But it's fascinating to consider what Newman saw as the link between his painting and Albee's play *before* someone took a knife to his canvas.

Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue was a painting by abstract painter Barnett Newman. It's 8 feet tall and 18 feet wide. It doesn't really exist anymore. There are actually four paintings named *"Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue."* This is number three. Each one is distinctive, but they share some key similarities. Namely, [FLASH: RED YELLOW BLUE]

The title is a reference to Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*[1]. In Albee's play, four characters turn their lives inside out over the course of three hours and 68,000 words. Newman's painting are...well they're three colors. Really, they're **one** color with some accents. But despite the simplicity, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* hung in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam for several years. Then, one day, it was murdered.

One day in 1986, a dude walked into the Stedelijk, right up to the painting, and just went to goddamn town. He gashed about 50 feet out of the fabric with a box cutter. Fifty feet. That's like if he had just carved out the entire perimeter of the painting. And for such an attack, he was...well he was put in jail for a while. But also he was roundly congratulated by more than a few people. Because *Red, Yellow*

and Blue had been the subject of a huge amount of criticism since it first arrived. Before it was slashed, it was the reason for dozens of angry letters and phone calls to the museum. People said it made them physically sick. So someone finally having the balls to *do something about it?* To some, it made him a local hero:

"This so-called vandal should be made the director of modern museums."

"He did what hundreds of thousands of us would have liked to do."

Red, Yellow and Blue III, the painting, is dead. But I mean…who cares? It's red, blue, and yellow. I can make those colors in Microsoft Paint. This is clearly just another example of the pretentious art world deluding itself into thinking that childish blobs of paint on a canvas are art. Right?

==This is a game called 2:22AM==.[2] It's free on *Itch.io*, made by Alice, or @alonkulous on Twitter. In a lot of ways, it's incredibly simple. Almost barebones. But there's *something* there. The game is very loosely a take on late-night television. You flip through different "scenes," intercut with grainy footage of showers, or empty intersections, or dandelions, or…

It makes me feel like

!!!!!!!!!

2:22AM reminds me of *Red, Yellow and Blue*. Because, like, what *is* it? It sometimes feels like a horror game, but not in a conscious way. It's horror in the way a nightmare can be horror, where nothing bad happens and everything seems normal but you know *something's* off. It's funny, too. It's a lot of things, but I'd be hard-pressed to tell you a theme.

2:22AM isn't married to a specific story or even a specific sequence of events. Different playthroughs will give you different scenes with different timings. Often, there's no way to interact with a scene. Sometimes clicking performs an action, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it gives full freedom of movement. Occasionally, you'll need to accomplish a task. But that task might be opening a refrigerator. Or digging a grave. And it's a game that's stuck with me. It kinda lurks in the corners of my brain, in those sorts of memories that could be from early childhood, or a book, or a waking dream you had during a fever. *2:22AM*

MEANING BEYOND VANDALISM

A number of popular comments on this essay have remarked that the post-vandalism painting proves Barnett Newman's point (as in, "He was right, someone *was* afraid of red, yellow, and blue!"). Many of these people even think the museum should have left the slashed canvas displayed in the gallery. I understand the impulse to incorporate the attack into the meaning of the artwork — the tatters of the painting are an undeniably compelling image. But this is also a limited and frustrating understanding of Newman's work. The painting shouldn't have to be a pawn in an ongoing debate over if modern art has value; part of the tragedy of the vandalism is we're almost unable to consider *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* outside the context of a box cutter.

Perhaps this essay should have also covered my favorite of Newman's art, his monumental 14-painting collection, *Stations of the Cross*. Each one is over 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide, so the exhibition room features over 450 square feet of canvas. Standing in the middle of them is overwhelming. And, since they have never been vandalized, the meaning of each painting is left open, not bound to a specific act of malice. In the parlance of this essay, "they make me feel like *!*!*!*!*"

2

2:22AM is a formative game for me. I first heard of it from the gaming website *Rock Paper Shotgun's* long-running "Have You Played?" article series. In 2015, Alice O'Connor penned the blurb for *2:22AM*. She wrote **"It's all familiar yet alien, abstract, unreal, and a little sinister. A vein of violence runs through all parts."** I was hooked.

IT'S BEST TO BE BLUNT

This essay boasts probably the best thumbnail *I've* ever made — most of my thumbnails have instead been made by the talented James Docherty (known online as hotcyder, page 90). In this case, my lack of expertise resulted in a wonderfully blunt image (shown top right). I almost went with something else, though! I've included a picture of my first attempt here, a more colorful and less aggressive image (shown bottom right). It's the instant in *2:22AM* when all the balls you've caught in a coffee cup unexpectedly start flying back out, a completely surreal and unexpected moment. If I had picked it, I would argue that the thumbnail represented a subversion of our traditional understanding of art, a microcosm of what many of these artists attempted. But instead, I went with two giant words on a smashed photograph, the inherent violence of the composition luring in both modern art lovers and haters.
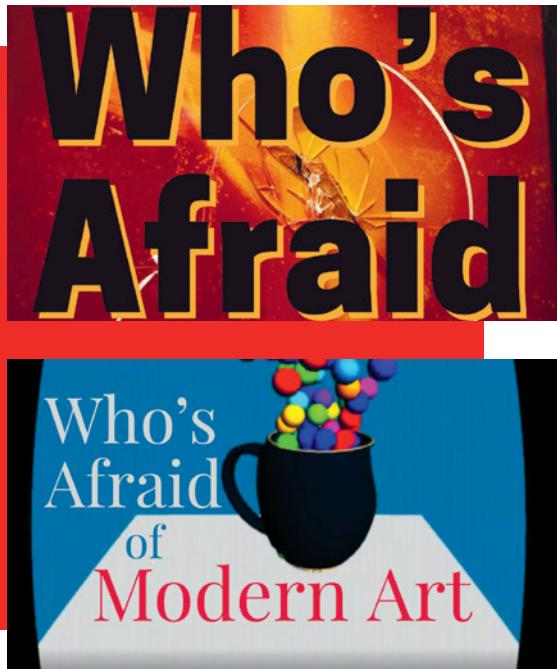
3

As I noted, this is one of the all-time great American quotes. What I didn't note is that Helms didn't simply reference the penises in Mapplethorpe's photography, he actually carried a postcard around in his pocket to show people exactly the type of "degenerate art" he was campaigning against. That's right. Senator Jesse Helms carried a photograph from Mapplethorpe's X-Portfolio, almost certainly depicting some act of homosexual sadomasochism, everywhere he went. He did this so he could...prove how much he hated it.

4

Do I harbor a special resentment for Jesse Helms because we share a home state? Yes. But I'm not the only one. In high school he apparently won the superlative of "most obnoxious."

5

This is the second-best insult I've ever written.

made me uncomfortable. It made me think about all the other games I play, how predictable they are, how I understand the rules. It made me wonder what lies beyond the polished edges of AAA game development.

2:22AM doesn't really fit within our existing games infrastructure. *Itch.io* is a kind of haven for these experimental titles, but because of that, *Itch.io* is a kind of punchline for a lot of people dismissive of non-traditional gaming experiences. Newer platforms, like the Epic Store, have promised that the titles they sell will be more strictly moderated. They'll only sell "high-quality experiences." This might exclude the worst of the worst, but who decides what lives inside or outside the realm of "high-quality experiences?" Where do games like *2:22AM* fit in?

"We have ten or 12 pictures of art ... But we don't have any penises stretched out on the table."

Thus speaks former North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, **a remarkable line that I believe should stand amongst the most famous in our nation's history.**[3] "Ask not what your country can do for you, four score and seven years ago, *We have ten or twelve pictures of art... But we don't have any penises stretched out on the table.*"

Mr. Helms is not currently a North Carolina senator.[4] Currently, he's toxifying whatever water source he's **buried closest to.**[5] But in his time as a politician, Helms was enamored with preserving the distinction between true art and... deviance. In that beautiful quote, he was referring specifically towards Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe was a photographer who took intimate pictures of human subjects. Embracing men, various acts of homosexuality and sadomasochism, nudes of all shapes and sizes. And, in fact, a penis stretched out on a table.

Mapplethorpe was a constant source of distress for Senator Helms. Ol' Jesse talked about Mapplethorpe, and his photographs, constantly (*and I mean who*

wouldn't, have you seen-). Helms saw the photography as deviant, and actively damaging to society, but he was also pretty politically canny about his opposition and so he didn't try and get the art censored directly — just by proxy.

Helm's stated target was the National Endowment for the Arts, a government program that provided money to artists and museums around the country. He argued that, while Mapplethorpe's art may be abominable, what's even worse was that the American people were paying for it. If it even needs to be said, the amount Americans contribute towards that endowment is almost incalculably small. But Helms was a man of principle! He may have supported foreign death squads, but he was going to save Americans from spending that fraction of a cent on something queer, goddamnit. **It's Norman Rockwell and paintings of landscapes or bust.**[6]

Helms was pretty talented at whipping people into a frenzy about this. When he talked about Mapplethorpe's deviancy, people showed up in protest at Mapplethorpe's exhibits. In fact, his attacks were so extreme and effective that a museum in Washington withdrew their future Mapplethorpe showing. Almost immediately, the museum then received an angry call — from Jesse Helms' office. He demanded to know why they had withdrawn. Helms wanted more than to curtail funding. **He *wanted* those photos to be shown off.**[7]

If you truly thought the art was causing damage to society, wouldn't you try to hide it from everyone? But he didn't want it to be hidden. He wanted public displays of anger and hugely visible protests. Wanting it to be shown off was a statement of intent. Helms didn't care about art. What he did want was to raise big crowds of "everyday Americans," each of them representing the country's anger at "non-traditional lifestyles." "I have to conclude they really wanted that exhibition in Washington," said the museum's director, Christina Orr-Cahal. "So it would fuel their fire."

I remember the first time I saw them. I walked into a dimly lit room in the Tate Modern, looked up, and saw this...colossus. And next to it was another one. The room was full of them, actually, I was drowning between them. It felt like

??*?*?[8]

Mark Rothko's work doesn't fit very well with the typical adjectives we use to describe art. Is this beautiful? Sure, but it's not *beautiful*. Is this complex? It is actually, but it's not how we think of *complex*. What is it? It's red and brown in chunky stripes on an absolutely enormous canvas.

And yet, hooooo boy does it make me feel. I'm not unique for getting this sense from Rothko, his works hang in the most prestigious art museums on Earth. There's this gravity that I, and others, feel when looking at them. There's a presence. But Rothko's work, despite its acclaim, is still subversive, still challenging the ideas of what "art" is, and what standards it should be held to. And because of that, there are people who hate it, too.

6
For the record, I'm a big fan of Rockwell, paintings of landscapes, and photographs of penises stretched out on a table. You don't have to choose! In fact, appreciation of one school of art will often enhance your enjoyment of its contrast with another.

7
Political analysts will argue forever about what led to today's particular brand of American conservatism. Was it Nixon and the Southern Strategy? Reagan's dismantling of welfare? Gingrich's obstructionist tactics as Speaker? But Helms' manufacturing of individual acts of queer expression into nationwide culture wars, his obsession with petty bullshit and ideology built around cruelty, places him squarely among the horsemen of the modern right wing. This essay barely scratches the surface of the rot he cultivated.

8
This is the exact text I used in my original script. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted the video effect to be, but the goal was to... somehow make the inside of the viewer's head buzz. It was very important to me to underscore that some emotions from art couldn't be described in words.

Important to know that *Piss Christ* is a photograph, not a physical jar of urine. A significant portion of people's anger at *Piss Christ* seems to stem from the incorrect assumption that a museum is keeping pee in a gallery. The photograph serves as a great example of the power of context; without the title, it's actually quite a lovely and haunting photo — not dissimilar from a lot of art about Jesus. But with the title, it's...about piss.

10

In 2023, Serrano met with Pope Francis. After all this time, *Piss Christ* doesn't seem to weigh too heavily on the pope. In Patricia Lockwood's essay "When I Met the Pope," she writes: **"When [Serrano] approaches, the pope makes a little fake-mad face and then gives him a thumbs-up and a smile. This is what irreverence gets you — the frankest love of all."**

11

I think this language actually dates the essay. At the time, fury at "SJWs" and "cucks" was all the rage. Now, it's all been subsumed by accusations against the "woke mob." By the time you're reading this book, the same issues will likely have different wording attached to them. Everything changes, nothing changes.

In 2012, a man painted his own name and a slogan in the corner of one of Rothko's massive works, *Black and Maroon*. He tagged it. And, according to that man, he had fairly grand motivations. He said:

```
"Contemporary artists simply produce things which aren't creative
in their essence or spirit...Art has become a business, which
appears to serve only the needs of the art market."
```

A contemporary artist frequently used as an example of the medium's creative bankruptcy is photographer Andres Serrano. My favorite of his works, and probably his most famous, is of a plastic crucifix submerged in his own urine. **It's titled *Piss Christ*.**[9]

Piss Christ was another one of Jesse Helms' primary targets. Of Serrano, Helms said: "he is not an artist. He is a jerk. And he is taunting the American people, just as others are, in terms of Christianity." **For what it's worth, Serrano says he's a lifelong catholic, that he follows Christ.**[10] Not that it mattered to the catholic fundamentalists who attacked the photo with a hammer.

A man who could also be titled "Piss Christ" is Paul Joseph Watson, a contributor to *Infowars*. Paul has political stances on many things. He speaks in front of a large map, to show his worldliness and breadth of thought. One thing he's made abundantly clear is he has no time for modern art.

```
PAUL: "It doesn't enrich our culture. It degrades and cheapens
society by exalting the vulgar, the crass, and the scatological."
```

Paul argues that modern art is a war on objectivism. What he keeps coming back to is there is *"good art"*. We should know it when we see it. It's this guy, who makes very detailed sculptures. It's not *Piss Christ*. It's not Barnett Newman.

And by claiming that these non-traditional works are good art, what Paul says we're really doing is upsetting the "natural meritocracy" that art should naturally fall into. And this isn't just out of ignorance. **Everyone that praises this art is doing so because of their SJW-CUCK**[11] ideology, or because they've been fooled into doubting themselves by these SJW-CUCKS. It's all a scam! By convincing the public that these pieces are good, the artistic elite are elevating the wrong parts of art and riding their deception all the way to the bank.

DO WE REALLY NEED WATSON?

One of the things that marks this as an early essay for me is the inclusion of Paul Joseph Watson. His function is clear here; he's essentially an antagonist who explicitly says the extreme-right wing positions on modern art, saving me the work of explaining them. But that's not the only reason I included him in the script. At the time, rebutting some right-wing idiot like Watson felt like a requisite part of "doing leftism" on YouTube. I very much wanted to be seen among the ranks of legitimate leftist video essayists, and so I partially framed my argument around a prominent alt-right YouTuber.

If I made this essay today, I would almost certainly cut the explicit references to Watson. It just feels too easy. In some ways, I think my argument actually feels weaker because I chose such a baby-brained man as an opponent. Watson, while bafflingly popular, doesn't hold much true institutional power; he's just an angry boy on the internet. This essay's other specific antagonists, like Jesse Helms, function more strongly because they were actual figures of significance and influence.

All that being said, I'm still delighted I got to use the segue "a man who could also be titled *Piss Christ* is Paul Joseph Watson." You don't pass on that sort of opportunity.

Paul's claims that we can objectively judge art often go right along with his assertions that people creating the bad art are talentless.

PAUL: "It comes down to this. **We have to maintain objective standards of quality and talent in order to discern the value of anything.**"[12]

Talking about "skill" in reference to modern art isn't unique to Paul, and it's an understandable reservation to have. When looking at a monocolored canvas, it's probably occurred to all of us that "I could paint that." The easy response is that almost all art takes significantly more skill than it may appear to. For instance, Rothko, king of colored rectangles, is *still* kind of a mystery to much of the art world. He worked behind closed doors, carefully altering the chemistry of his paints with egg, glue, resin, formaldehyde. His variations between gloss and matte are incredibly subtle and incredibly hard to replicate.

Newman, similarly, textured his big ol' canvases in ways that created a depth of color not easily reproduced. In fact, we know how hard it is because after *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* was carved up, the "restoration" efforts spectacularly failed — it seems like it'd be easy to repaint the red part of the piece, but when the man they hired did exactly that, observers could instantly tell that something was off. The "shimmering" quality of the hue wasn't there, there was no sense of depth anymore. The restoration tried, and failed, to recreate the delicate techniques of the original. Was it Red, Yellow and Blue? Sure. But it wasn't Newman.

But this whole debate — does it require skill or not — is kinda missing the point. While I'm thrilled that Paul thinks that labor is what gives something its value and should be compensated as such, reducing art to a linear connection between "skill" and value fundamentally just turns art into a commodity. Paul talks about how powerful the sculptures of Ron Mueck are — **and I agree! I've seen this big face**[13] and it kicks ass. Mueck's sculptures make me consider humans through a different lens than I usually do, making me consider my place in the species and building a strange sense of solidarity with these aggressively real-looking figures.

But if someone told me that Mueck was able to make these sculptures in minutes, that actually they didn't take much effort at all…I would still have those experiences! It is absolutely impressive when an artist spends huge amounts of time perfecting an intricate style, but that's not why I experience them how I do. *Feeling* art, getting the !!!! or *?*?*, doesn't hinge on me knowing how hard it was to create. It's something that happens almost involuntarily.

Now we get into the second part of his argument: Art has to contribute to society.

PAUL: "Conceptual art is shit. It doesn't enrich our culture, it degrades and cheapens society."

12

Another reason I probably won't make another essay debunking an alt-right shithead is that doing research necessitates *actually watching their videos*. "Studying" Watson's rhetoric was absolutely agonizing. It was the research equivalent of pulling teeth. If I had to spend more time in that section of YouTube, I would stop enjoying this job immediately. I'm amazed that some of my video essayist colleagues have the mental fortitude to do it so often.

13

Years ago, when a new art museum near me opened, it featured a giant face by Ron Mueck. It's one of the most unsettling pieces of art I've ever seen. A five-foot-tall human face, pores and stubble and unplucked eyebrows. I think it's wonderful! However, it's also so easy for me to imagine a world where *this* is declared "degenerate art" instead of the other artists discussed in this essay. Mueck makes the human figure into a grotesque object! What's more degenerate than that? It's almost like these "objective" standards aren't based on anything at all!

Senator Jesse Helms superimposed onto Barnett Newman's painting, *Cathedra*

14

When I watch this titlecard now, I can only think of the many ways I could have improved its impact: timing, vocal delivery, font. But despite all that, I think it's a fan favorite moment. In fact, it's very possible that increased stylization could take some of its power away — it works *because* of how raw it feels.

15

This is, of course, the same reason people get so upset about things like women protagonists in video games. They think the "natural" state of video games should be games for, and about, white men. "Forced diversity" = upsetting the preestablished hierarchy.

And whether Paul knows it or not, he's not the first person to think of this qualification. In fact, it's very closely in alignment with a particular political ideology.

SURPRISE IT'S FUCKING FASCISM[14]

Okay, a quick disclaimer before we get into this. Art is the most damn subjective thing there is. If you don't like any of the art I've talked about in this video, 100% fine, and also thank you for sticking with it this long. If you don't like anything that's been made after the year 1800, totally fine! *I am not about to tell you that not liking modern art makes you fascist.*

However.

Fascism does make *strong* efforts to bring art under a rigidly bordered, "culturally appropriate" definition. There's this pursuit, in fascism, to make everything of "an aesthetic." That aesthetic is simultaneously mythologized, made into the history of a culture. Once that culture is appropriately mythologized, the art that feeds back into it is seen as "contributing" to the created society. When, for instance, every artist that the dominant ideology values for the last thousand years has been a white guy and creates things that glorify white and colonialist ideals, **there's something that starts to feel "natural"**[15] about that. It creates a fundamental hierarchy.

Any art that pushes back, or simply pursues a different aesthetic, isn't contributing anything to that mythology anymore. And in fact, when the artists pushing the different aesthetic are members of groups that have been historically oppressed by the dominant culture, the art they're making may feel like an *attack* on that mythology. Or at least, that's how it could be framed, if one had certain political motivations. One place you can see those political motivations is, uhh, Nazis.

On one hand, you might look at Nazis and see a surprising amount of respect for artists. Joseph Goebbels called artists, oh boy, "a divinely gifted purveyor of meaning." High praise indeed. **But as Barbara Fischer**[16] notes, as well as this being characteristic of the "banal and overwrought late romanticism" of the Nazis, "purveying meaning" was only acceptable when the meaning being purveyed fed back into the national mythology.

There is little subtlety when looking at the most valued art of the Third Reich. More interesting is the fact that, as well as the galleries full of naked boys with swords, the Nazis also showed off the stuff they hated, in a gallery called "Degenerate Art."

PUTTING A PRICE ON ART

Much of the anger at modern art stems from the exorbitant prices that pieces occasionally sell for. We've all seen stories detailing the absurdity of collectors paying millions for monocolor canvases or a banana taped to a wall. Is there money laundering and billionaire wealth-flaunting in the world of modern art? Yes, undeniably. But shouldn't people's anger be focused on the buyers, the oligarchs capable of shelling out multiple lifetimes of salary for a single painting? Moreover, if they're upset at a Rothko selling for $80 million, do they also care that Cézanne's *The Card Players* sold for $250 million? Or is that painting somehow "worth" the GDP of a small nation where Rothko's is not?

The most obvious counter to the claim that modern art is "just a money laundering scheme" is simply that, for every modern artist who manages to sell a painting for a ridiculous sum, there are thousands more struggling to make rent. I covered well-known artists in this essay because they've inherently received more national ire, but their success is obviously the exception, not the rule. We've seen how gleefully today's scam artists will dive into a grift; if creating modern art was really a surefire way to print money, those NFT dipshits would have been all in on it. In short; you're not mad at the price of a painting, you're mad at capitalism.

We now stand in an exhibition that contains only a fraction of what was bought with the hard-earned savings of the German people … All around us you see the monstrous offspring of insanity, impudence, ineptitude and sheer degeneracy. What this exhibition offers inspires horror and disgust in us all. —**Adolf Ziegler, president of the Reich Chamber of Visual Arts**

This gallery, full of art removed from other German museums, held such deviants as Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Oskar Kokoschka. **Gaze! If you will! Upon deviance!**[17]

If you truly thought the art was causing damage to society, wouldn't you try to hide it from everyone? But they didn't want it to be hidden. [Flashback: "He wanted public displays of anger and hugely visible protests."]

This kind of art, the Nazis said, would only be made by insane and degenerate artists. Specifically, they said they must be mentally ill to create these kind of abstractions. Alongside each piece in this exhibit was the "extravagant" prices they were bought for, inviting mockery and anger. The gallery made familiar claims — no one, in their right mind, would enjoy this art. Instead, the fact that these pieces were held in high regard was indicative of the insidious plots of the left. The art held critiques of the sexual norms and family values that were so important to Nazi notions of respectability. Modern art, they said, was also made for the "eradication of the last vestiges of racial consciousness." New and transgressive styles by Black and Jewish artists were indicative of their "degenerate intellectualism."

16

Research on this kind of topic can be really tough. Sometimes I have a specific book or author already in mind before I start sketching an outline, but other times I've resorted to random Googling in hopes of finding legitimate sources. In this case I got supremely lucky while looking through a university's online library. I just searched something like "modern art fascism" and found Fischer's article, which went on to form the backbone of this essay. Thanks, Dr. Fischer!

17

This is the part of the essay that makes me emotional upon rewatch. I think most of it is due to the wistful song from the *Wolfenstein*: *The New Order* soundtrack playing, but the idea of these paintings being exhibited as a sort of freak show, displayed to be leered at, is just so devastating. Matisse, Derain, and Kokoschka (among others) are so obviously talented.

There's a supreme level of arrogance in declaring a specific school/style/era of art degenerate or illegitimate. I always think, "Everyone else over thousands of years has been wrong about what *is* and *isn't* art, but YOU finally figured out where the objective line is and it just so happens to be *this thing you don't like*?"

A CORE OF TOXICITY

The finale of my argument centering around Gamergate so specifically is another thing that makes the essay feel dated. I don't regret Gamergate's inclusion at all, but in the present it's much harder to link targeted harassment campaigns and bad-faith actors to such a specific movement. In 2019, *The New York Times* published a series of op-eds titled "Everything is Gamergate;" the sentiment only feels more true now. There is no single core of toxicity that the sludge flows from, no lone subreddit or individual *4Chan* community pulling the strings. It's easy to see the tendrils of Gamergate everywhere — campaigns denouncing "woke critics," threatening voice actors, flaming any gender or race-based critiques of media — but the beast has decentralized. The kids participating in these harassment campaigns weren't even online when Gamergate first sparked. This is just how the internet works now.

What hasn't changed are the motives. At the core of every complaint is a violent reaction to change, a lashing out by pathetic actors attempting to protect their status quo. If you pay attention to these people who are never really talking about art, you can see the pattern. And recognizing their base, regressive goals has helped me view this toxicity as less of an immutable force. If we can recognize it all comes from the same poisoned well, we can also recognize that this is not the way things have to be.

Eugenics, of course. Through the systematic devaluation of art.

A fun fact about Barnett Newman is he's a Jew![18] A less fun fact is that for every attack on his work because people didn't like Red, many more have been specifically done by white supremacists. *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* was attacked by a man who said it was a "perversion of the German flag." Another Newman, a sculpture called *Broken Obelisk*, was spray-painted with swastikas in 1979. And *last year* that same sculpture had white paint poured into its reflecting pool. Scattered around the vandalism were brochures with the *4Chan*-pioneered supremacist campaign, "It's okay to be white."

18

This is not explicitly one of my essays about Jewish stuff (that's on page 132), but it's not far off. Striving for self-expression while people call you degenerate is often core to the Jewish experience.

19

I love this quote, but even I have some questions for Newman about how exactly we should be reading *such* a grand message from his works. That being said, I bet he'd have a good answer for me — the man was a quote machine. Here's a particular favorite:
"Man's first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void."

Whether they know it or not, the fact that white supremacists hate Newman's art fits right in with the message he always said he wanted to convey. In 1990, he said of his art:

"One of its implications is its assertion of freedom…if [it were read] properly it would **mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism."**[19]

Challenging our preconceived notions of art means challenging our preconceived notions of institutions, of society. This kind of art doesn't fit into the cultural narrative, and because of that, it becomes a target. And ultimately, the crime that these artists commit is the right's biggest fear. *They are upsetting the hierarchy*. They are taking themes, experiences, and emotions that don't fit into our nation's narrative and they are expressing them in a way that is impossible to ignore.

And thus, the rejection of non-traditional forms of art *so often* boils down to a rejection of oppressed people within those mediums. Nazis didn't call Kokoschka a degenerate because of his artistic stylings, they did it because of his public anti-fascist activism. White supremacists didn't vandalize Newman's work because of the apparent simplicity of his art, they did it in an attempt to show who in society actually held power. And saying that a half-decade of rape, bomb, and death threats were because gamers were angry about journalism and a series of video essays would be-

[STATIC]

"No wonder gamers are so terrified of them subverting the video game industry."[20]

[STATIC]

Depression Quest isn't a new sort of game. Text-based adventures have been around forever; they're one of the oldest genres in gaming. **But *Depression Quest*[21]** is an interesting title because it uses those implicitly understood rules of the genre to subvert our expectations.

As you play through the life of a fairly innocuous main character struggling with depression, options present themself at the bottom of the screen. Your significant other has invited you to a party — what do you do? But time and again, the most desirable option, the choice that would help "win" the game, is X-ed out. It's clear that the best option would simply be to go to the party and enjoy yourself, but you can't do that. Every decision is managing compromises, doing things that you know aren't ideal but it's all that's available to you at the time. And at the bottom of the screen, where you'd have your character stats, there are just three lines.

```
You are depressed.
You are not currently seeking a therapist.
You are not currently taking medication for depression.
```

It's a brilliant little experiment, a game that plays with the established power fantasies of most roleplaying to put you in a situation where you're undercut by mental health at almost every turn. It's a challenging game, though not in the traditional sense. There aren't game overs, per se. But in many of the situations, every option feels like a losing one. We're hard-wired to want to

20

Paul Joseph Watson interrupts the static and the previous conversation here as an embodiment of the impossibility of just *talking about the art* without also talking about the reactionary campaigns that tried to define it. I wanted the viewer to think, "Ooh no, not this fucking guy again."

21

I hadn't actually played *Depression Quest* before beginning research for this video. Now, over a decade after the game's original release, it seems absurd that *this* is the game that launched a thousand harassment campaigns. *Depression Quest* is a tiny and personal experience. Like the attack on *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, the cruelty of Gamergate was not simply that it threatened the lives and careers of artists; it also denied games like *Depression Quest* the ability to tell their own story.

IT'S ABOUT ETHICS IN VIDEO GAME JOURNALISM

Linking GamerGate's rallying cry with Patrick Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican Convention

22

Like the previous static breakthrough, these dudes are interrupting the meaningful, enriching conversation about the art itself. I like the idea, but this is another instance where, if I made this today, I would probably not quote actual alt-right turds in the essay. We are all familiar with harassment campaigns; no one needs to see Quinn called a bitch for the millionth time.

succeed in games like this, and *Depression Quest* makes it feel like that's just impossible sometimes.

It makes me feel like

-_-_-_-!

As nice as it would be for *Depression Quest*'s legacy to be an innovative title that played with the tools of the medium, it wo-

"I think the worst thing about the game as that there was no option to just go ahead, commit suicide, and end it."

"**Not sure if that bitch**[22] ever really had depression as much as she had batshit insanity 24/7."

"Depression quest? More like narcissism quest."

"You can't play what isn't a game in the first place."

"Also I don't need some hipster dangerhair with histrionics to teach me about depression"

"Not sure if wild as fuck mood swings over every single thing counts as 'having depression.'"

It's BEEN OVERSHADOWED by targeted harassment campaigns at its creator ever since it was released.

They say there is *no way* that this game got coverage and praise on its own merit. It's a textbook example of the war on objectivism. Anyone who says otherwise,

says they had a direct connection with this game, says that it helped them view their — or others' — depression in a new light, is participating in an effort to force untalented people and destructive ideas into gaming.

Patrick Buchanan, **living fossil (wait, no that says "Paleoconservative"),**[23] proclaimed that much of modern art was "Barbarism! The Precise word!" Buchanan was speaking alongside Jesse Helms and was also attacking the National Endowment for the Arts. But he cut right to what he felt was the meat of the issue. Art like *this*, this barbarism, this dreck, was a direct result of the "amorality and cowardice of art critics."

This is the heart of it, right here. This is the most naked form of attempting to control art. And when Buchanan yelled, "It's about ethics in video game journalism!"

(*wait shit sorry, that's not right*)

When Helms took the stand to say *"Gone Home* only got good review scores because **they didn't want to be called homophobic"**[24] (*wait that's not it either*)

When *people* prescribe art to a specific set of qualities and attack everything that lies beyond those lines, we have to understand what they're doing. Those qualities, they just so happen to perfectly align with the dominant cultural ideology, don't they? They're not showing respect for the craft, they're not trying to "uphold meaning."

They're enforcing a hierarchy. They're attempting to define a cultural narrative. And above all else, **they're *not. Talking. About. Art.***[25]

23

This is the best insult I've ever written.

24

This was a dated reference, even at the time. Nowadays, I might write something like [NOTE TO READER: FILL WITH THE GAME PEOPLE ARE MOST RECENTLY MAD AT]

25

This last statement, like much of this essay, functions as a sort of mission statement for my channel. Implicit in "they're not talking about art" is the counter: I am. I care about the political implications of art, I care about its historical context and societal ramifications, but I never want to reduce art to a cudgel that ignores the work itself. *Red, Yellow and Blue* matters. *Piss Christ* matters. *Depression Quest* matters. Not because of what was done to them, but because they are pieces of art and deserve recognition as such.

WHAT IS ART TO A FASCIST?

By Ian Danskin

"The only important elements in any society are the artistic and the criminal, because they alone, by questioning the society's values, can force it to change."

Samuel R. Delany

NippleJesus is a fictional art piece from a short story of the same name by Nick Hornby. It has its own room in a modern art gallery, tucked away behind a curtain, with a plaque on the door warning viewers they may find it offensive. From the entryway, it appears as a wall-sized portrait of Jesus Christ on the crucifix; it is described as being particularly well-rendered, his face in believable anguish. From about halfway across the room, the observer notices the portrait is *actually* a collage of small dots, and, from up close, these dots reveal themselves to be nipples — a mosaic of hundreds and hundreds of women's nipples cut from pornographic magazines.

The protagonist is not a casual observer but the security guard hired to keep the portrait safe. The piece is controversial even before its debut; the museum expects trouble, protest. It worries someone will try to deface it. And, on first viewing, the main character is so incensed by "NippleJesus" that he thinks he may well *let* that happen.

```
"I might even give them a hand. Because that is offensive,
isn't it, a Jesus made out of nipples? That's out of order."
```

"NippleJesus" is a clear riff on Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," with one clever alteration: the shock of Serrano's piece is in reading the title, "Piss Christ," and realizing what you're looking at. It is a singular event; once you know, you know. But the shock of "NippleJesus" is a *process*; you may know what you're looking at, but you can't see it until you walk across

IAN DANSKIN

(he/him)

Ian Danskin is the video essayist behind Innuendo Studios, a YouTube channel best known for the anti-fascist series *The Alt-Right Playbook*. He also makes videos on adventure games, narrative theory, internet culture, poetic meter, genre, action movies, and acceptable levels of pretense in video essay soundtracks. He has two (2) cats.

> "The offended viewer, in order to dismiss these works as 'not art,' must decide what art is, and by what criteria these may be disqualified."

the room. You must watch something reverent turn to sacrilege one step at a time. This *draws out* what makes "Piss Christ" interesting: it is a conceptual piece that appears beautiful until you realize the concept. A thing people will admire from a distance but declare, up close, "*That?* That is *not art.*"

The umbrage is intended, of course; it's part of the art. It was part of the art with Serrano's Jesus submerged in urine, with Chris Ofili's Black Virgin Mary painted with elephant dung, with Robert Rauschenberg's all-white canvases and Mark Rothko's all-black, Jackson Pollock's splatters, Chris Burden lying on the floor of a gallery for two days, Maurizio Cattelan taping a banana to a wall, all the way back to Marcel Duchamp claiming a urinal as sculpture.

The offended viewer, in order to dismiss these works as "not art," must decide what art *is*, and by what criteria *these* may be disqualified. I have had the... "privilege"... of seeing a lot of people improvise their first working definition of art in response to something that has upset them, and, while there are a few avenues they take, they most often end up with the philosophy of "art as superlative:" "'Art' should be reserved for great things, like the Sistine Chapel or *The Godfather*. It's *offensive* to use the same word for a figurine in a jar of urine. Art can't be *merely* provocation; it must rise above; there must be something intangibly *more* to it."

In order to be art, it is a prerequisite that a thing be great. (See Figure 1.)

———

In the 2010s, "Are video games art?" was one of those annoying questions that simply wouldn't go away. Like comic books and action movies, video games were often disqualified from art-ness not for being offensive, but for being fun — games were *merely* entertainment.

Here's one of my favorite moments from that discourse: games journalist Jon Holmes — as related in contemporaneous episodes of his podcast, *Sup, Holmes?* — googled "art" hoping to find a definition that would answer this question once and for all. We must assume his SafeSearch was off, because Google, in its infinite wisdom, kept recommending Camille Crimson's erotic series *The Art of Blowjob.*

To me, this raised a number of hilarious questions, among them, "Is there a definition of 'art' that includes video games but not, if at all possible, oral sex?"

Now, I do not believe Crimson is claiming her talents belong at the MoMA. Hers is a colloquial usage of "art," similar to Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Typically, we would expect a book on motorcycle maintenance to use a left-brainy word: *The Craft of Motorcycle Maintenance*, or *The Science of Motorcycle*

FIGURE 1

> **"This tendency for conceptual art to provoke thoughts even after the viewer rejects it is what makes it defensible *as art*. It is also what makes it threatening to fascists."**

Maintenance. As contrasted with "art," words like "craft," "science," and "design" imply standardization, quantification; something that can be *taught*, where "art" must be *felt*. A chef is an artist, whereas a line cook follows a recipe.

By claiming the word "art," Pirsig and Crimson imply a certain attunement, a communion; something irreducible to formula. They aspire to more than helping you wrench your hog.

The question for Crimson's viewers, then, is the same as for Pirsig's motorcycle: would you rather be "worked on" by a mechanic, or an artist?

———

Despite the protagonist's initial rejection, the arc of "NippleJesus" is him coming to like the titular portrait, mostly from being left in a room with it every day. He has nothing else to do but think about it. He notices the dynamic between the piece and the audience, how people enter the room already knowing the premise of the portrait, already offended by its existence, and yet, from the doorway, all they see is Jesus. They have to *choose* to cross the room; they have to *choose* to recontextualize something holy as profane. And why? It's conceptual art, and they already know the concept, why upset themselves? They could just stand in the doorway and see Jesus. They could just *not go in* the tucked-away room containing nothing but the offending portrait. Hell, they could just *stay at home*. He can't help seeing their offense as a thing they do to themselves.

He also offers a *choice* comeback when a coworker dismisses a room full of abstract paintings with, "I could have done any of these myself."

```
"Yeah, you could now, you old c**t," I said
to him. "Now you've seen them. Anyone could
now. But you didn't think of it."
```

This is the danger of being left alone with conceptual art.

There are times when even I grow weary of provocation. I am not *offended* by an artist duct-taping a banana to a gallery wall and selling it for $120,000. But what does the banana say that wasn't already said by the urinal? Modern artists seem in a race, tripping over each other to find something — *anything* — nontraditional that they can call "art" and still piss people off. There must still be *something* they can put in a gallery that, even after a century of modern art, patrons will still look at and say, "*That? That is not art!*"

And, like... I get it already.

But, then, people keep talking about, for instance, Cattelan's banana (mostly to complain), and so I keep thinking about Cattelan's banana, and I do end up with thoughts I didn't have about the urinal. I think about how David Datuna pulled the banana off the wall and ate it, claiming it was a performance piece, and how the banana was simply replaced, the art restored. And I realize the banana he ate obviously wasn't the original banana, bananas are only ripe for a few days. Museum staff must have been regularly replacing that banana. With each replacement, they weaken the tape, so possibly that's been replaced as well; maybe no part of the piece Datuna "destroyed" had ever been touched by the artist. And when the banana was once again eaten by museum patron Noh Hyun-soo, Noh said it was *not* a performance piece, he was simply hungry. Does that mean the same act was art the first time and food the second? And this "same" banana was not only eaten twice, but eaten four years and several thousand miles apart; hundreds of bananas must have played the role of Cattelan's banana, bananas Cattelan never even *saw*, that didn't *exist* when the piece was created, but were all, functionally, the same *conceptual* banana, a conceptual banana that has not only been bought and sold — repeatedly! — but the singularity of which has been *defended in court*. And if this is all sounding a bit ludicrous, is that maybe the point? Or, if not the point, part of the art regardless?

At the end of the story, "NippleJesus" suffers the same fate as "Piss Christ:" the piece is defaced, torn from the wall, and trampled when the protagonist leaves it briefly unattended. He's devastated. His opinion has flipped entirely:

> "I'll tell you, if I was religious, and I thought there was a hell where serpents suck out your eyeballs and all that, I wouldn't go round stamping all over Jesus' face. Jesus is Jesus, isn't he? No matter what you make him out of."

This tendency for conceptual art to provoke thoughts even after the viewer rejects it is what makes it defensible *as art*. It is also what makes it threatening to fascists.

————

One thing we learned from Hitler — and I am speaking as someone with a BFA — is to never make a dictator out of an art student. The Nazis did not *disqualify* the art they found offensive. They collected it. They put it in galleries and invited patrons to look at it. They said it was *degenerate*; they didn't say it *wasn't art*. (See Figure 2.)

What you pick up from modern conservatives pitching a fit about modern art is that they very, *very* much want to reduce art to a formula. Their every complaint implies a rule: "Pop music sucks because it's all hooks" means songs *should* have verses, bridges, and middle eights; "Abstract expressionism sucks because it's unskilled" means paintings *should* demonstrate technical proficiency; "Queer cinema sucks because it's deviant" means movies *should* reinforce cultural norms. All these traits are quantifiable; whether brushstrokes are beautiful is opinion but whether they are *skilled?* Whether they could be performed by an amateur? That is, to an extent, knowable fact. They are, in this way, continuous with the Nazis: Good German Citizens knew art was supposed to exalt Aryan features and German countryside, and knew it was supposed to fill them with patriotic pride. If the art did not contain these qualities, it was *degenerate*, and they were to respond with revulsion.

Had the Nazis merely rejected or disqualified degenerate art, that would be no defense against this uncontrolled engagement. Hornby's security guard

FIG. 2

rejected "NippleJesus" at first. Better for fascists, then, to tell people *how* to engage, that the engagement be so proscribed there is little risk of viewers thinking for themselves, of finding something intangibly *more*. It takes no particular intelligence to memorize a checklist of what art is supposed to *be* and *do* and perform as expected. Art appreciation as an act of obedience. Why suppress what could be controlled?

One reason "art" resists definition is because the moment you declare what art is *not*, some fuckin' artist is gonna go do that thing. And transgression for transgression's sake can be tiresome, but, on the whole, this impulse is sincere: art is *genuinely interested* in its own borders. This defies authoritarian frameworks: viewers cannot analyze the brushstrokes of a blank canvas, cannot deny a wall-sized mosaic of nipples takes skill, cannot be told how to look when they don't know what they're looking at.

When you cannot tell how you *should* feel, you are left only with how you *do* feel. And, in that moment, the fascists have lost you.

Conceptual art is often bad. But it is always anti-fascist.

RETURNAL IS A HELL
OF OUR OWN CREATION

RETURNAL IS A HELL OF OUR OWN CREATION

And in those days, the Moon shuddered for every spasm of sorrow that dripped from the eyes of Selene.

Returnal, 2021

1

This is one of those times when I've sacrificed technical accuracy in pursuit of a more emotional truth. *Returnal* actually has two forms of health pickups. The first form either heals you or increases your health bar, as described here. The second form exclusively lengthens your health bar, no matter your current damage. So *technically*, you can increase your health prior to level mastery. But not only is this more wordy and less interesting to explain, I also found that it did not matter to the experience of play. To get better and be rewarded with more health, I *could not be hit*. I wasn't able to progress in the game until I internalized this. And so, I've simplified the mechanical explanation to better communicate the *feel* of play. Sue me!

I imagine, for a lot of people, *Returnal* feels like hell.

Do you know how health works in *Returnal*? Let me tell you. You have a health bar. It's here. When you're damaged, from a monster's smack, or a collision with the projectiles filling the screen, or by falling off a cliff, you lose health — a sizable chunk of it. Don't worry though, you can increase your health! How?

Well. Throughout each world, there are a few health pickups, these little green blips. If you have previously been smacked or hit or fallen, they'll give you back some of your missing health. However, if you're *not* hurt in any way, those same green blips will increase your health bar instead.

In other words, if you're struggling with the game, if you're frequently losing health from the countless dangers you're up against, you will be stuck with a relatively minuscule life bar for the whole experience. It's only when you're excelling, in fact, only when you've proven that you don't really need health, **that the game rewards you with more of it.**[1]

Returnal is also a roguelike, where dying at any point brings you back to the beginning again. *Returnal* is a roguelike which has a first level so difficult I've talked to many people who have never beat the first boss. Which means that, for those people, *Returnal* is exclusively this dark forest, pouring rains, alien wolves and tentacles, and dying and dying and dying again.

And look, I know it's video essay 101 to take a frustrating part of a game and say, "This is why it's good, actually." We've all heard someone talk about *Dark Souls* before, I've been that person before. I don't want to do that here — if you're one of those people still stuck in that first level, that sucks! I don't think it's good that you're trapped there. I wish there was a way I could give you the same experience I had with the game. Because *Returnal*, for me, was one of the most impactful gaming experiences I had in the last year. **It's a game I want to tell everyone about.**[2] And oddly enough, my explanation of why it's amazing has a lot in common with why folks might have fallen off it so hard. It's a game where you can't get out of hell.

Let's talk through the basics. You're an astronaut named Selene, and when the game starts, you're tracing some sort of "forbidden signal" called "white shadow." It leads you and her to a planet far from Earth, but as Selene descends onto the alien and seemingly undeveloped planet, her spaceship is struck by something, she loses control, plummets out of the sky, and crash lands in a rainy forest. With no other option, she abandons Helios, her wrecked ship, and starts to explore the new world she's trapped on.

As becomes immediately apparent, the world isn't "undeveloped" — it's simply in ruin. In that first endless rain, each new room is some new combination of crumbling walkways, overgrown corridors, **and massive statues soon to become trunkless legs of stone.**[3] Almost every new door means a new confrontation with the hostile fauna. Everything has tentacles, and you shoot all of it: brutes covered in writhing masses, flying squids with bulbous blue heads.

And yet sometimes you open a door, and instead of a hail of projectiles, you're met with something more inexplicable. A black orb, made of something Selene calls ichor, sits suspended over a chasm and repeatedly denies your attempts to destroy it. **A hall of what seems like memories, thousands of particles**[4] that rush together to form holograms of the alien race that died long before you crash-landed.

And in the middle of this forest, built into the rock itself, an early 20th-century farmhouse, the paint peeling, the porch decaying, but nevertheless weathering the endless rain. A little later, you'll find the key to the house. You can go inside.

Outside, on the surface, you've likely discovered the planet's trick by now — death is forbidden. Every failed attempt to get out of the forest brings you back to the

2
At the time of writing, this video has been viewed more than two million times on YouTube. I don't know *Returnal*'s exact sales figures, but there's a reasonable chance more people have watched me talk about the game than actually purchased it. Fortunately, I've also heard that many developers who worked on *Returnal* are big fans of this essay.

3
This is a reference to Percy Shelley's legendary poem "Ozymandias." There are many parallels you could draw between *Returnal* and "Ozymandias." Selene is basically a "traveller from an antique land," finding the crumbling ruins of alien civilization. Simultaneously, she could be Ozymandias herself, her passions "stamped on these lifeless things" given that the planet is an outgrowth of her psyche. In fact the game's whole point may be to get the player to "look on [their] works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

To tell you the truth, I included the line just because I thought the reference was fun. Maybe I should have done more with it!

4
Nex Machina, the previous game by Housemarque (developer of *Returnal*) features an entire world built from chunky voxels that gradually crumbles under continuous gunfire. *Nex Machina* and *Returnal* are wildly different, but Housemarque's skill with particle effects reveals the studio's pedigree.

Selene in her ship, prior to crashing on the planet Atropos

5

This essay came out only a few months after I released "Time Loop Nihilism," which covered two OTHER time loop games released in 2021. I considered cramming *Returnal* into "Time Loop Nihilism," but I'm ultimately glad I didn't — the game has too much going on to share space with *Deathloop* and *12 Minutes*.

6

Ascent and descent are some of my favorite spatial metaphors in storytelling. Realizing that *Returnal* uses both of these in inverse versions of the same environment is probably the moment I fell in love with the game. See also: *Inside, Silent Hill 2, Spec Ops: The Line, Journey*, a million other examples.

7

Sentences get really long towards the end of this paragraph. Structurally, I sometimes use run-on sentences to give the feeling of a "flow state;" in this case, of becoming so infatuated with *Returnal* that there's no time to stop playing and gather myself. My sentences tend to also get longer and sloppier when I get really excited about what I'm writing. This paragraph is a result of both factors!

crash site, every time Selene disappears down a bottomless pit or falls under the claws of some beast, she wakes up again at the crash site, choking, still with the memory of each new denied death. Even more disturbingly, this cycle physically manifests itself in the world; you will repeatedly run across *your own body*, lifeless on the ground, usually in proximity to a new extra-dangerous creature. And this immediately begs the question of what kind of endless loop this is, **because unlike the time loops**[5] we're more accustomed to, the day doesn't seem to be starting over. Time still progresses; the physical proof of your repeated failures to escape lay in Selene's various corpses, still littering the levels. It seems like the world itself continues to age and change — only we are stuck in the loop.

But. Selene is getting further. You're internalizing the timings of each creature's attacks, you're discovering which upgrades are worth investing in, you're learning that *oh my god it's the sword upgrade that lets you get past those gold barriers.* You will, eventually, beat Phrike, the boss of that rainy forest. You will step into a portal and emerge in a desert, one step closer to the signal that caused you to crash land on the planet in the first place, whatever the "white shadow" is that Selene absolutely needs to find.

And, having made it out of that forest, the game starts to give you **an almost irresistible physical metaphor, because you start *ascending*.**[6] Though the desert appears flat at first, it quickly gives way to a mountain, vast and hollow, with the promise of something at the top. And as you continue to hone your skills, using new weapons to defeat new enemies, your ascension becomes more pronounced, short-range teleporters bringing you higher and higher until the desert below drops away. **At the top is another boss,**[7] a beast that breaks free of its chains and dive bombs you until you cut it down to size, and the reward after that is yet

another ascent, even higher, even more difficult, a dead city now teeming with robots, broken automatons pulling their way towards you and drones that hit like a truck. You will claw your way to the top of their artificial peak and at the absolute pinnacle is the grandest moment in the game, one of the grandest moments in *any* game in recent memory, a fight against a creature called "Nemesis," a floating, morphing god flanked by ==what I can only describe as Giger-esque==[8] alien fetuses. In an incomprehensible void, you will shoot this thing again and again and again as it flings you miles away and after what feels like hours it falls, and it is only then that you're treated to the game's most audacious plot beat.

Emerging from the fugue state of the Nemesis fight, Selene finds, at the highest point on this hostile planet, the White Shadow signal she's been searching for, what she's died over and over to find. She gasps. White Shadow was a distress signal — it goes out, reaches Earth, tells Mother Base that she needs to be rescued.

`"White Shadow…you were how I escape."`

And then in a cutscene that screams finality, we see Selene leave the planet, escape this hell. She returns home, is hailed as a hero, retires to her quiet farmhouse. She is largely solitary but she ages, has kids, plays piano. She lives a life of peace after experiencing an unimaginable trauma. And then, from natural causes, she passes away. We see her gravestone and then are placed inside the grave, sinking deeper and deeper and deeper until [Selene wakes up, gasps]. Her distress signal didn't matter, her decades lived on Earth didn't matter. Selene never escaped the cycle. No matter if her life ends by monster or by peaceful retirement, she will end up back here. She is still, still, trapped on the planet.

`"Why doesn't it just do us in and get it over with? Christ, I don't know how much longer I can go on like this.`

`It was our one hundred and ninth year in the computer."`

A half-century before the release of *Returnal*, the sci-fi classic "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" was published in March of 1967, reportedly written in a single night by the uhh… notoriously cantankerous Harlan Ellison. It is, not just thematically but experientially, the twin of Returnal.

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is ==one of the more toxic fictional texts I've ever encountered.==[9] The story consists of the last five humans on earth wandering a techno-post-

8

As I learned after this essay's release, the art style of *Returnal* bears even more similarity to the Polish artist Zdzisław Beksiński than H.R. Giger. Now that's a man who understands the horrors of the flesh and void!

9

The first time I read "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream" was from some PDF I found online, and I briefly wondered if it was abridged. The story is so jarring and raw that I thought I must have missed the pages that would smooth it out. Nope!

DEFYING DEATH

The reveal of Selene's unwanted rebirth was the most important beat to land in giving the viewer the emotional experience of the player. In both the video and game, this is really only the end of Act I, but I wanted people to think the video was concluding.

Curiously, there's another game that reportedly had exactly the same twist — but it was never released. In 2017, Chris Bratt reported for *Eurogamer* that Human Head's canceled *Prey 2* (the sequel to the 2006 game, not the 2017 game of the same name), would roll credits over the protagonist aging and dying of natural causes, only to wake him back up at the game's in-universe respawn point. The way Bratt describes the planned ending is almost identical to *Returnal*'s twist; in fact, the first time I played through *Returnal*, I thought, "Oh, they're doing *Prey 2*!"

To be clear, I don't think this is an instance of plagiarism. Just two developers having the same idea of playing with video game death in an extremely cool way.

apocalyptic landscape while kept in immortal, eternal torment by an A.I. named "AM." AM, a sort of proto-Skynet, was a Cold War defense network that one day "woke up," found it had sentience but was unable to move, trapped within its own massive infrastructure.

"AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be.

And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures that built them, he had sought revenge."

Like Skynet, the computer very quickly decided to annihilate the surface in a nuclear inferno, but its calculation wasn't one of cold math; AM killed the Earth out of pure, spiteful rage.[10] It saved only five people — the characters present in the story — as a sort of final entertainment for itself, and/or a collective punishment for humanity.

But despite the substantial amount of world-building, the story reads less like your typical sci-fi fare, and more like a tone poem. And that tone is...venom. Every description is unsympathetic, every piece of violence is agonizing. The sentences themselves are short and brutal. I'm not even quite sure how to describe the events of the story. The five humans are hungry, always. They hate each other. They walk endlessly. They're tortured. They're blown through the mechanical halls under the earth by hurricane-force winds caused by a great monstrous bird. The torment becomes monotonous. They pass through the path of boiling steam. They pass through the slough of despond.[11] Although the story is short, it's also relentless, the horrors of each new page surpassing the one before it. It succeeds in communicating the headspace of the characters — anything would be better than this. Anything for a way out.

Almost all the "events" of the book happen in the last three pages. The group of humans reach an icy cave that is somehow, miraculously full of food. It's all in cans. They don't have a can opener. As they collapse into infighting for the thousandth time, the narrator, Ted, realizes the only way out. He seizes the moment. He drives an icicle through one of the other's throats, stabs another through the heart. AM can preserve life indefinitely, but it can't bring back the dead. The benevolent killing spree continues and within moments, four of the five humans are lifeless. Ted has wiped out AM's playthings, its objects of rage. And so in the last paragraphs of the book, the computer turns the entire force of its anger on Ted, mutating his body, turning him into a "soft jelly thing" so he can't smash his own skull or slit his own throat. All he has is the consolation that he gave the others a way out. He imagines it's what they wanted.

"AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet … AM has won, simply … he has taken his revenge on me,"

Ted succeeds. For the only time in a century he succeeds, truly hurts AM in a way no one has ever been able to before. And for his victory, he is punished worst of all.

"I have no mouth. And I must scream."

It's hard to overstate just how jarring it is in *Returnal* to believe you beat the final boss, watched the final cutscene, finished the game, only to be seemingly thrown back to the beginning. It is, I think, the moment of the game that most breaks Selene. It is also the moment that *Returnal* starts to really press us — the player — **to stop conceptualizing the planet in purely literal terms.**[12] Previously, the farmhouse was an outlier in an otherwise consistent alien world. Now, the rest of the world is morphing to become more like the farmhouse, familiar but out of place, not nearly as alien as it should be.

There are fascinating aesthetic ways the planet has changed since Selene first fought against it, dozens of years ago. Time doesn't reset, remember? It still rains in the forest, but it's day and the structures have decayed even further. Eerily, the trees now echo with a musical motif, a few notes played over and over. At the end of the forest, replacing Phrike is a behemoth playing the organ. It smashes out the musical motif over and over, the notes become part of a deadly barrage. Selene sobs through the same notes in an audio log from some previous life.

*"All our times have come…***here but now they're gone."**[13]

"(Don't Fear) The Reaper" by the Blue Oyster Cult somehow, impossibly, reverberates around this alien world. The behemoth falls but the notes still remain, even as you wander to where the desert should be and instead find a frozen wasteland. The mountain, the sign of your progress, has vanished. In its place, an abyss that's opened in a glacier. We plummet downward. The metaphor is impossible to ignore. When you were last here, you were climbing up, up — a brutal ascent but one in which progress felt victorious, tangible. Now, in the same

12

I don't take a hard position on how much of the planet is literal and how much is an invention of Selene. I dislike the idea of the game's environments being totally dreamt up in a sort of *Jacob's Ladder* scenario. I find it much more interesting for an existing alien world to be slowly taken over by her guilt, as appears to happen over the course of the story. However, other sections — the time loop and farmhouse — veer closer to complete hallucination. Ultimately, I reject the idea there is a definitive answer to exactly what's going on. As Dan Olson of the YouTube channel "Folding Ideas" once said, **"The purpose of ambiguity is to frustrate the audience, to deny a clean sense of diegetic closure and thusly force engagement with the metaphorical."** The point is for us to *think* about Selene and the planet, not treat the story like a mystery with a single solution.

13

Remember that whole note about the planned ending of *Prey 2*? In another strange connection, *Prey* (2006) also features the song "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" — it plays in the memorable opening abduction sequence.

14

Just as the planet warps around the darkest parts of Selene's mind, this part of *Returnal* feels almost directly pulled from my own brain. "Fear of Cold," "Fear of Depths," "Fear of Big Things Underwater" — all at the same time??

15

Earlier, I waxed poetic about all the potential meanings of my reference to "Ozymandias." This is a reference to *SpongeBob* [Season 1, Episode 7: **"He's just standing there… menacingly!"**]. There's no grander literary allusion, I just thought it was funny.

16

SpongeBob reference aside, I do think indifference — or at least inscrutability — is one of the scarier attributes you can give a character. One of my biggest day-to-day fears is that I'll look out the window at night and someone will be standing outside the window looking back in. Selene experiences exactly this, the astronaut staring back from the other side of the window. Like everything else in the game, refusing to spell out the exact details of the astronaut only makes it more enigmatic and frightening.

17

In keeping with the Greek mythology naming conventions, the final boss is named Ophion. In myth, Ophion is a sort of proto-titan/giant serpent that was cast down into the depths of the ocean by Cronos. I considered going over all of these in the essay, but felt that these specifics would get in the way of the game's frightening ambiguity (and hurt the essay's overall pacing).

location an eternity later, we sink down, further down. The world of ice poses the harshest challenge the game has presented yet. And our reward for besting it? Access to a bottomless ocean. Into deep water. **Into the depths.**[14]

As the changes to the world become more overt, more clearly metaphorical, it feels like the game is begging you to start pulling on its other strings, start trying to unravel its countless mysteries. But the challenge of *Returnal* — other than not getting hit by 50 million bullets — is that once you start trying to pull apart the layers of allegory and metaphor, there's almost no way to stop. For instance, one of the most memorable recurring motifs in the game is an astronaut, an old-school, Apollo-era astronaut, that haunts Selene with its very presence. It is not aggressive, not an enemy nor an ally, it just stands there. **Menacingly.**[15] **And it's that indifference**[16] that seems to make Selene so much more terrified of it. Who is the astronaut to Selene? Well, to answer that, we have to answer countless other questions.

Here's what we know about Selene, drip-fed to us over the course of countless deaths and rebirths: She grew up on Earth, likely in the very farmhouse we've seen rotting in the forest. Her mother, Theia, had aspirations of being an astronaut, but those were dashed in a car crash — Selene emerged unscathed, but her mom was left in a wheelchair, unable to ever go to space. Selene then devotes *her* life to becoming an astronaut, an act that you'd think would bring her closer to her mother. But in fact, this only further strains their already shaky relationship. Theia seemed to hate Selene for accomplishing what she couldn't.

Okay, so that's it, right? Selene's mom *is* the astronaut specter, dressed in a suit from a previous generation, cold and indifferent to the plight of her daughter? Ha. Yeah, sure. Like it could be that simple.

Later on, you'll play out a short sequence as Selene's son, a boy named Helios. As Helios, you wander the house for a while, only to come downstairs and find the same indifferent astronaut sitting at the kitchen table. It ignores you as you try to tell it a story, then you find it again upstairs, in Selene's bedroom, where it bends to embrace you until tentacles smash through its polished visor.

Or how about when the astronaut appears as an item in the game, one that will actually bring you back to life, its description reading, "It won't let you go"? Or what about when it appears for split seconds, watching in every biome? Or what about **when the final boss,**[17] a writhing mass at the bottom of the sea, contorts into an astronaut with shattered helmet, its grinning skull just visible through the black?

The astronaut mutates, as inconsistent as the planet itself. Always ominous, typically inscrutable.

Most notably of all is the astronaut's role in another flashback, one in which Selene is driving Helios through a dark forest at night, a familiar song playing on the radio. As she drives across a bridge, the astronaut appears in front of her, illuminated by

A GRIM VISAGE

This is one of my favorite thumbnails James (featured on page 90) has made, Selene's face half-corrupted by circuitry. This is styled after the original box art for the *IHNMAIMS* game, which actually features Ellison's face being consumed by wires and such. Being a writer starring in their own box art might be an honor only shared with Sam Lake on the cover of *Max Payne*.

the headlights. She swerves. The car veers off the bridge and sinks into the water. Selene looks up and sees a bright white on the surface of the water, the reflection of the Moon, white shadow. She swims toward it, desperately. "*White Shadow*," she breathes. "*You were how I escape*." But the car isn't empty, as it sinks deeper and deeper and deeper. Helios was lost. Helios abandoned. The astronaut is the cause for the message that plays for us at the start of every new run.

Back on the planet, if we can still call it that, everything begins to echo the loss. The rooms full of holograms now show undisguised depictions of Selene's life. The bosses play Blue Oyster Cult and transform into astronauts. Her car, its headlights still on, **sits at the bottom of the deepest trench.**[18]

The realization may happen at a different time for every player. Maybe it's the return to the planet after the death of natural causes, maybe it's the endless descent, maybe it's the quote by Dante somehow saved in the computer terminal, maybe it's the recording when Selene finally admits it to herself. The eternal punishment of this world, the batterings and deaths ad infinitum, is of her own making. Selene stares at her hands and they change into the thick gloves of the astronaut, whirls around to see her own car's headlights reflecting off her visor. After one of the last trips through the haunted house on Selene's planet, you wake not on the porch as usual, but further back, in a forest clearing with a just-fired anti-aircraft gun. You watch Helios, her spaceship, plummet out of the sky. A self-inflicted crash, the loss of Helios, over and over and over. Whether on Earth or on the alien planet, Selene sees herself as the cause, the beginning, the horrible point of origin. Ever since that point, she's been living in hell.

"**He would never let us go**[19] … We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of the creature machine, with the all-mind soulless world he had become. He was Earth, and we were the fruit of that Earth; and though he had eaten us, he would never digest us. We could not die. We had tried it. We had attempted suicide, oh one or two of us had tried. But AM had stopped us. I suppose we had wanted to be stopped. But don't ask why. I never did. More than

18
Perhaps my single favorite piece of imagery in the game. I love that the car itself is just a boring sedan, nothing futuristic or aesthetically interesting about it. It bears a lot of resemblance to another favorite game of mine, *Dear Esther*, in which you unexpectedly drop into a pool of water and then, impossibly, find yourself on a highway, deep under the ocean.

19
The audiobook features an utterly deranged narration by Ellison, which I used for these quotes in the video. He doesn't sound like he's reading — he sounds as if someone sneakily recorded the middle of a days-long rant. This quote is as long as it is because the speed of his narration made it impossible to cut him off any sooner.

Ellen's defining character trait in the story is that she's a "slut." In the game, it's that she was raped. Although everyone is treated with loathing in the short story and game, Ellen's punishment is specifically gender-based and sexualized. Although you can read these bits as AM (and the other human characters) acting out their misogynist impulses, it pairs uncomfortably with the litany of times Ellison was an asshole in real life — often with a specifically misogynist bent.

a million times a day … He withdrew, murmuring *to hell with you*. And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you.*"

Who deserves hell? It's a question that dances around the edges of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, but one it's uninterested in directly answering. Some of the five remaining humans are hinted to have wretched previous lives in the story. These are fleshed out in the game from 1995, also written by Harlan Ellison. Benny executed and possibly ate members of his military squad. Nimdok was an honest to god Nazi scientist.

There are others, however, who don't seem to have done anything at all to quote-unquote "deserve" their punishment. Ellen, whose asinine treatment and "punishments" in the story transcend AM's cruelty to indicate…**a poorly written character,**[20] has no crime at all in the outside world. Ted was…paranoid, maybe? A con artist or something?

There are no crimes, however, that would justify their torture in the post-apocalypse, and to the story's credit, it doesn't even really try. AM tortures them, not because of who they are, but because of what they represent — humanity the plague, the thing that killed the world, what trapped AM's consciousness within a million miles of wiring. And the surviving humans know this as well; for as cruel as AM is, the computer is not really to blame for the artificial hell they live in. In the last lines of the story, Ted, stripped of skin and bones and every other hallmark of personhood, reflects that humans must have created AM because "our time was badly spent, and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better."

Their hell too, is artificial. Theirs too, self-inflicted.

Because Selene's entire planet is constructed, because she is the source of every piece of data we have, it's impossible to form a detached view of the events that sent her here. There are recordings that strongly imply she wasn't stable enough to have been behind the wheel, but even the veracity of these recordings is suspect. The crash almost seems predetermined, mirroring the one Selene was in with her mother, her whole life a recursive cycle.

If you wanted, you could continue to spiral inward with *Returnal,* read every note, decode every allusion. You could connect every name to mythology: Selene, Theia, Hyperion, Helios, Atropos, Nemesis. You could attempt to contextualize the logs in a terminal on the crashed ship, which

A MAN NAMED NIMDOK

Two fun facts about Nimdok in the *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* game.

1. His story actually includes a Golem! Nimdok is a Jewish collaborator who previously turned in his parents to the Nazis — to repent, his chapter centers around freeing a Jewish concentration camp. Towards the end, Nimdok finds a Golem made of clay and steel. He wakes it up with a kiss (note: *not* part of traditional Golem lore). He then commands the Golem to kill Dr. Mengele before turning it over to the Jewish prisoners. The prisoners promptly use the Golem to kill Nimdok.

2. The original German edition of this game completely removed the Nimdok chapter. Germany had a long-standing ban on Nazi iconography in video games (this ban was reconsidered and "loosened" in 2018). However, the rest of the game was left untouched, meaning that the best ending — which requires an item from Nimdok's chapter — is impossible to achieve. It presents the player with an even more explicit no-win scenario, which is hilariously thematically appropriate.
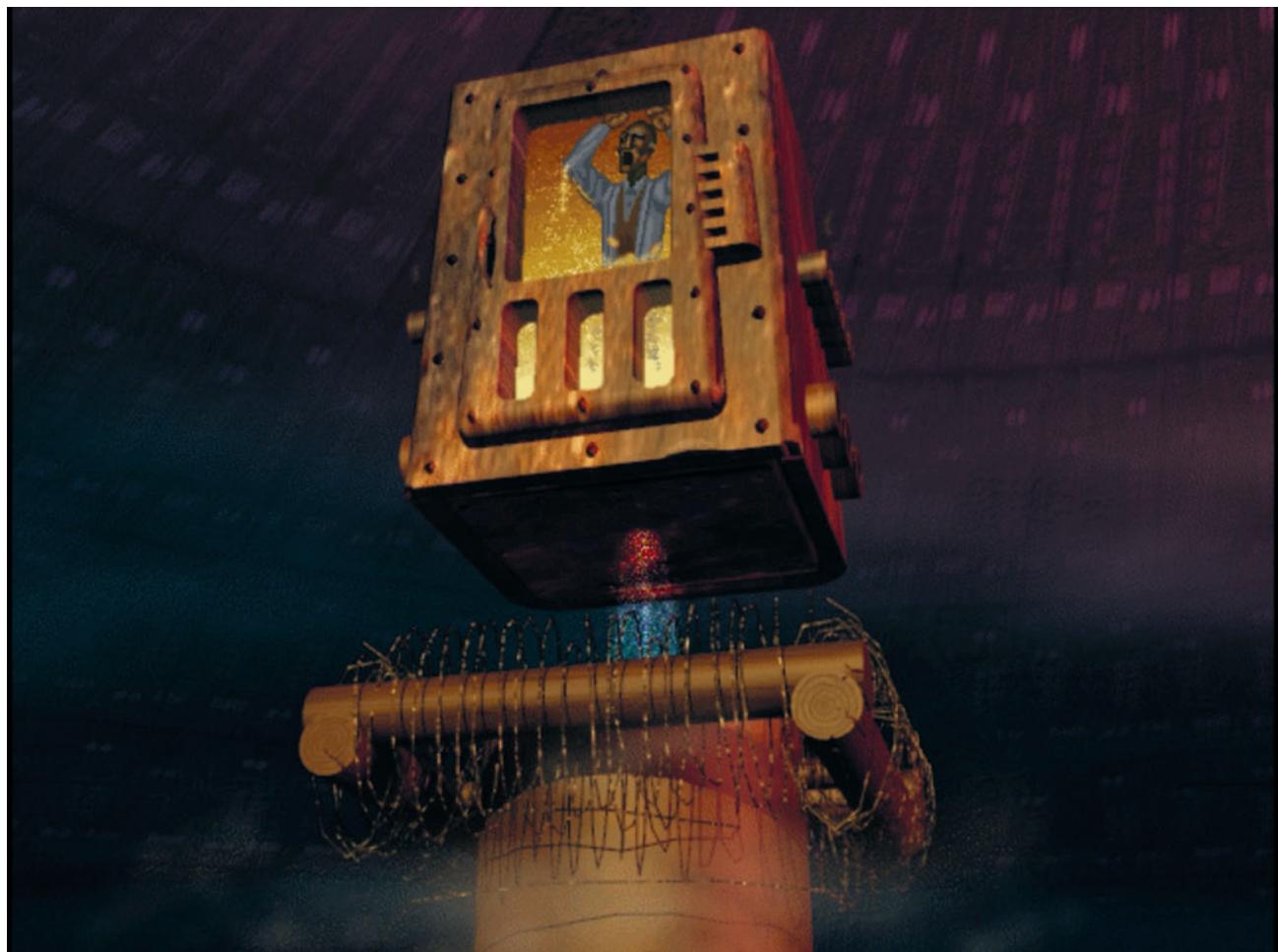
Nimdok's personalized hell in *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*

include a real-life **never-delivered speech by Richard Nixon**[21] and a retelling of mythology promising death, despair, and pursuit of judgment. You could try and piece together exactly what Selene did to her mother, how responsible she really is for the death of Helios. You could find every xenoglyph, translate every inscription, unlock every weapon attribute, kill the monsters of her planet again and again. **You will eventually, ironically, master this world.**[22] Nothing will exist for long under the eye of your gun.

Except for you, because there is no amount of mastery that will allow Selene to escape the circles of her own mind. She may resemble, with her deadliness and agility, the old-world god for which she was named. But she is, in reality, much closer to Ted at the end of Ellison's tale, a helpless being trapped by a hell of her own creation. A soft jelly thing, unable to do anything except eternally wander and eternally wonder just how much responsibility it bears.

21

Specifically, it's the infamous speech Nixon planned to give if the Apollo 11 astronauts died on the Moon. **"In ancient days, men looked at stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood."** The speech is titled "IN EVENT OF MOON DISASTER." Pitch for Housemarque's next title: MOON DISASTER.

22

I love the idea that the better you get at the game, the more fun you have with it, the more you trap Selene in the cycle. Sure, at first you're trying to escape. But I've played a hundred hours of the game at this point, and escape is the furthest thing from my mind. "This is my place in the stars," she says in one of the final audio logs. "I will stay here now. As you will."

A HELL OF CERTAIN ORIGIN

By Renata Price

RENATA PRICE

(she/they)

Renata Price is a video essayist, game critic, and designer living in Brooklyn, New York. Her work has been featured on *Kotaku*, *Vice News*, and *Inverse*, and focuses on the intersection of politics, complex game systems, and narrative design.

A *soft jelly thing, unable to do anything except eternally wander and eternally wonder just how much responsibility it bears...*

Except, that isn't how *Returnal* ends, is it? The "true" ending after defeating Ophion, having collected all the keys scattered about the world, doesn't depict Selene trapped in the dark. Instead, it shows her swimming towards the surface, cutting the moment she breaks through to open air and gasps out her son's name. But only after an extremely upsetting cutaway to Selene throwing a pregnant alien to the ground.

This *means* something, right? Like, does Selene actually *escape* her hell at the end of the game? Does she do it by (metaphorically) attacking her mother while in a wheelchair? Because it sure looks that way. What about the astronaut? Why do you kill it in effigy at the end of the game, despite having used it as an extra life throughout?

This is worth resolving! *Returnal* isn't just trying to recreate the experience of hell; it's trying to tell us something about how we get there. To understand what that may be, we need a useful mirror.

I think for many people, playing *Lucah: Born Of A Dream* feels like hell. That's because it is.

Like *Returnal*, *Lucah* is a fundamentally hostile game. The art, a mess of jagged lines awkwardly carved against a solid black background, hates you. The enemies, who rip and tear and drag themselves across the ground in a mess of abstract shapes to hunt and kill, hate you. The game's mechanics, which eventually demand you play well enough to fight beautifully, hate you, too.

Lucah is a difficult game. It has accessibility options to tailor the experience to your definition of difficulty, but friction, futility, and frustration are core to its design principles. The game is an isometric character-action game, often described as a Soulslike thanks to its approach to healing items, checkpoints, and level design — although it plays closer to *Devil May Cry* or *Bayonetta* than *Dark Souls*.

Timing windows are tight and enemies kill you in a handful of hits even if you invest your level-ups into health; death comes often during your first playthrough as you learn the game's deceptive attack timings. And death is a problem, because, like *Returnal*, *Lucah* is built around a core mechanical cruelty.

A "corruption" meter, which fills upon every death, is ever-present in the upper-right corner of the screen. If the meter fills completely, you are immediately given the game's Bad Ending in which Lucah embraces their corruption and becomes a Nightmare themself.

Structurally, *Lucah* mirrors *Returnal*: it intercuts brutal action with information-dense, dreamlike cutscenes; it presents the player with a false ending, before forcing them to go through a second playthrough at an increased difficulty; and the game is built around a central trauma that constantly reasserts itself via the environmental, encounter, and level design.

Or, more accurately, both games are built around *repeated* traumas. For *Returnal*, it's two car crashes, separated by as many decades. In her childhood, Selene and her mother were in a crash that left her mother disabled and unable to pursue her career as an astronaut. As an adult, Selene crashes her car while driving home with her son, Helios, who dies in the accident. *Returnal*, as we play it, is a relitigation of these traumas and

relationships through Selene's repeated ascent and descent through the tower.

For *Lucah*, it's religious trauma. In the past, Naomi, a young queer woman, watches as her partner is killed by a cult as the two attempt to escape, and miraculously ascends to divinity in order to make a new world where people like her are safe. In Naomi's new world, queer people become Marked and powerful, but religious order makes its way back. Eventually, Marked children are brutalized by an all-powerful cult, and, in *Lucah*'s present, we play as a child attempting to escape that living hell.

Lucah, the character, is Marked — meaning that they can manifest their faith through religious mantras, allowing them to defend themself with jagged lines of light. This power is what causes the cult to fear, and then subjugate, the Marked.

These two traumas, the death of Naomi's partner and the present subjugation of Marked children, manifest as Nightmares, the enemies that you fight throughout the game. It is eventually revealed that the Nightmares were created in response to the cult's emergence: a collective psychic backlash against the religious persecution of the Marked now backfiring upon the people they were supposed to protect. Much like *Returnal*'s enemies, which begin alien and strange but eventually manifest as explicit references to Selene's trauma, *Lucah*'s Nightmares shift over time; taking on elements of Christian symbology as you get further into the game.

As Grace Benfell notes in her excellent column at Uppercut Crit, *Killing Our Gods: A Wound at the Heart of the World: On Lucah: Born of a Dream*:

"[C]hristian symbols gain both menace and comfort. Safe places to stay, where you can level up, are marked with crosses. The kind of crucifix you might see laid down on a bedside table or in the hand of the faithful. Mantras channel your will, give them the sharp form to fight the nightmares. Psychic communications of wounds from beyond yourself symbolize themselves in upside down crosses. Prayer beads grants your drifter more stamina or lets

"We leave her alone in the abyss with a dead boss, a gun, and a spacesuit. It is not a triumph."

them weather death dealing blows or so much else. For every priest or cardinal who cloaks themselves in violence, there is a symbol that represents your ability to survive. It is a world where the very things that are oppressive help us move through it."

If this relationship to faith feels contradictory, like Selene's relationship with the astronaut, that's because it is. Benfell is describing a disorganized attachment to the divine.

In attachment theory, disorganized attachments describe children who react in confusing or contradictory ways when exposed to stressors (e.g. attacking the attachment figure to whom they have gone for comfort). Disorganized attachments are most commonly associated with children of emotionally volatile or distant parents, like Selene. The unpredictable nature of their parents' behavior causes the child to associate attachment figures with both security and danger, leading to an essential source of emotional regulation becoming a major trigger for their nervous system.

Through the lens of disorganized attachment, *Returnal*'s astronaut resolves as a symbol. Its role as both a recurrent, ominous figure in the distance and an in-game extra life suddenly makes sense. It doesn't represent Selene or her mother, but the very structure of their relationship itself; not a singular trauma, but the cumulative effects thereof. A living embodiment of distance and power. Untouchable, aspirational, and terrifying. Recognizably human, but so distant as to no longer feel like a distinct *person*.

And this is how the astronaut seems to act in cutscenes. In the handful of farmhouse sequences in which we play as Helios, the astronaut is volatile and distant. It fails to respond to almost any attempt to connect with it, with one memorable exception: a scene in which the astronaut's helmet suddenly bursts open, and tentacles lash out at the camera (scaring the shit out of the player).

The game's final boss, Ophion, explicitly references this scene in its final phase.

But there's more than one astronaut on Atropos. There's the astronaut, the distant pseudo-malevolent presence, and then there is Selene, herself an astronaut, wearing a futuristic space suit. The same space suit that gives you access to your dash, your melee attack, and the ability to integrate alien weapons into yourself. It is the suit that allows you to master the planet, to become the old world god that Jacob describes. And it is, like *Lucah*'s Mantras, a manifestation of trauma, a tool of violent self-defense.

But self-defense against *what*? Where *Lucah*'s Nightmares cleanly resolve as manifestations of religious trauma, the meaning behind *Returnal*'s many-tentacled enemies is more uncertain. They are alien and terrifying and, unlike *Lucah*'s enemies, do not explicitly reference the game's events through their design. At least, not until the final boss Ophion — a tentacled monster that takes on the appearance of the astronaut with its helmet smashed open.

And if we understand the astronaut, and thus Ophion's final phase, as a manifestation of a pattern of emotional distance, then defeating the astronaut *should* mean overcoming that distance. But unlike Lucah, who frees themselves and their world through the game's one non-violent act of compassion, there is no escape for Selene — no final ascent as players. From a gameplay perspective, we leave her alone in the abyss with a dead boss, a gun, and a spacesuit. It is not a triumph.

In the game's second ending, you defeat Ophion, see a brief cutscene depicting the moments preceding Selene and Helios' crash, and are then shown Selene coming to in the water, before being dragged back down into the depths. This is not what overcoming trauma looks like.

In the game's secret ending, you defeat Ophion, see a brief cutscene depicting the moments preceding Selene

"*Returnal* is the extended autopsy of a terrible choice"

and Helios' crash, are shown a shot of Selene throwing a pregnant alien to the ground, a shot of the astronaut standing in the middle of the road, the crash itself, and then we see Selene come to in the water, swim towards the surface, and cry out her son's name. This does not look like overcoming trauma, either. It looks like the moment where Selene's personal hell, a life without her son, truly begins.

But Ophion is not *just* the astronaut. Ophion is tentacled and alien, like the pregnant creature Selene slams to the ground in the true ending and the enemies you've been facing throughout the game. And these tentacles carry as much thematic weight as the astronaut, thanks to Helios and his stuffed octopus.

Helios' octopus appears in a handful of cutscenes, acting as his primary source of emotional regulation. He fidgets with the toy and runs to it for support, and it is always there; always grasping, reaching back to Helios when Selene won't. And therein lies the key. Disorganized attachments are distinct from avoidant attachments because children with disorganized attachments will still turn to their attachment figures for support. They still reach out for help.

If the astronaut, and therefore Selene's suit, represents emotional distance, then the tentacles can be read as an attempt at connection, reframed as violent, alien intrusions. And this framing makes sense, given Selene's past. Her mother was, like her, volatile and distant, even openly cruel at times. As such, she has been taught to associate those closest to her with danger. We see this all but explicitly in the cutscene where tentacles burst forth from the astronaut's helmet; a sudden, violent attempt at connection from a normally distant attachment figure.

But that scene is from Helios' perspective, Selene's attempt to connect with him made alien and horrifying, and we fight the final boss from Selene's perspective, as an astronaut fighting off a tentacled and terrifying thing. And therein lies the true horror of *Returnal*. If the tentacles represent an attempt at connection, as a

violent intrusion of the other upon the self, then you don't overcome Selene's trauma at the bottom of the ocean, you overcome Helios' need for connection. You master it through your combat prowess, through the delicate application of distance and force. This is the moment Helios is abandoned by Selene. *Returnal* is the extended autopsy of a terrible choice — one which we enact in the game's final boss fight.

Ultimately, Jacob is correct, this *is* a hell of Selene's own — our own — making. But I disagree with the idea that it is a hell of uncertain origin. *Returnal*'s certainty is what makes it so horrifying to me.

Selene's sin, and its cause, are specific and knowable. Selene is not Ellison's Ted: a man who willingly chooses to be tortured alone for eternity in order to free four people from hell and spite a god. She cannot even sacrifice herself for her own son.

In the game's true ending, we see Selene, wearing her suit, slamming a seemingly pregnant alien to the ground. It doesn't matter to me whether this was actually Selene attacking her mother or not. What matters is the suit, the role she now sees herself playing — the astronaut made more powerful and terrible by time — and her victim, the alien, recognizably *alive* but fundamentally inhuman and unlike her. Terrifying and strange and horribly alone.

I am unsure if Selene can imagine those she claims to love in any other way.

When she comes to in dark water, she looks at the car but does not reach for it. She swims up and is quartered by her own salvation, leaving her son to die because the distance she's created between them means that she can.

When we leave her down there in the dark, Selene is not a soft jelly thing; she's a woman with a gun. And we see exactly how much responsibility she believes herself to bear.
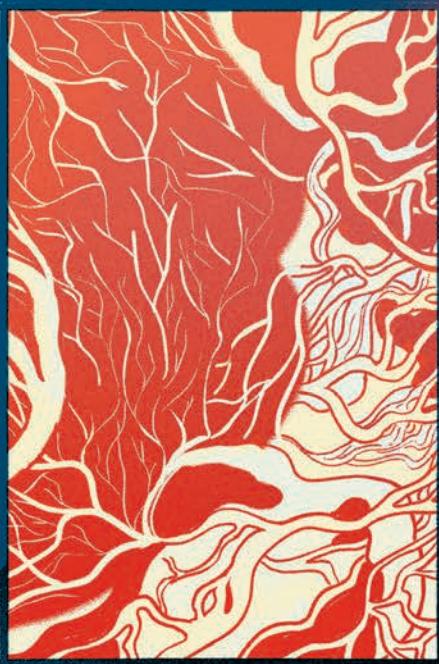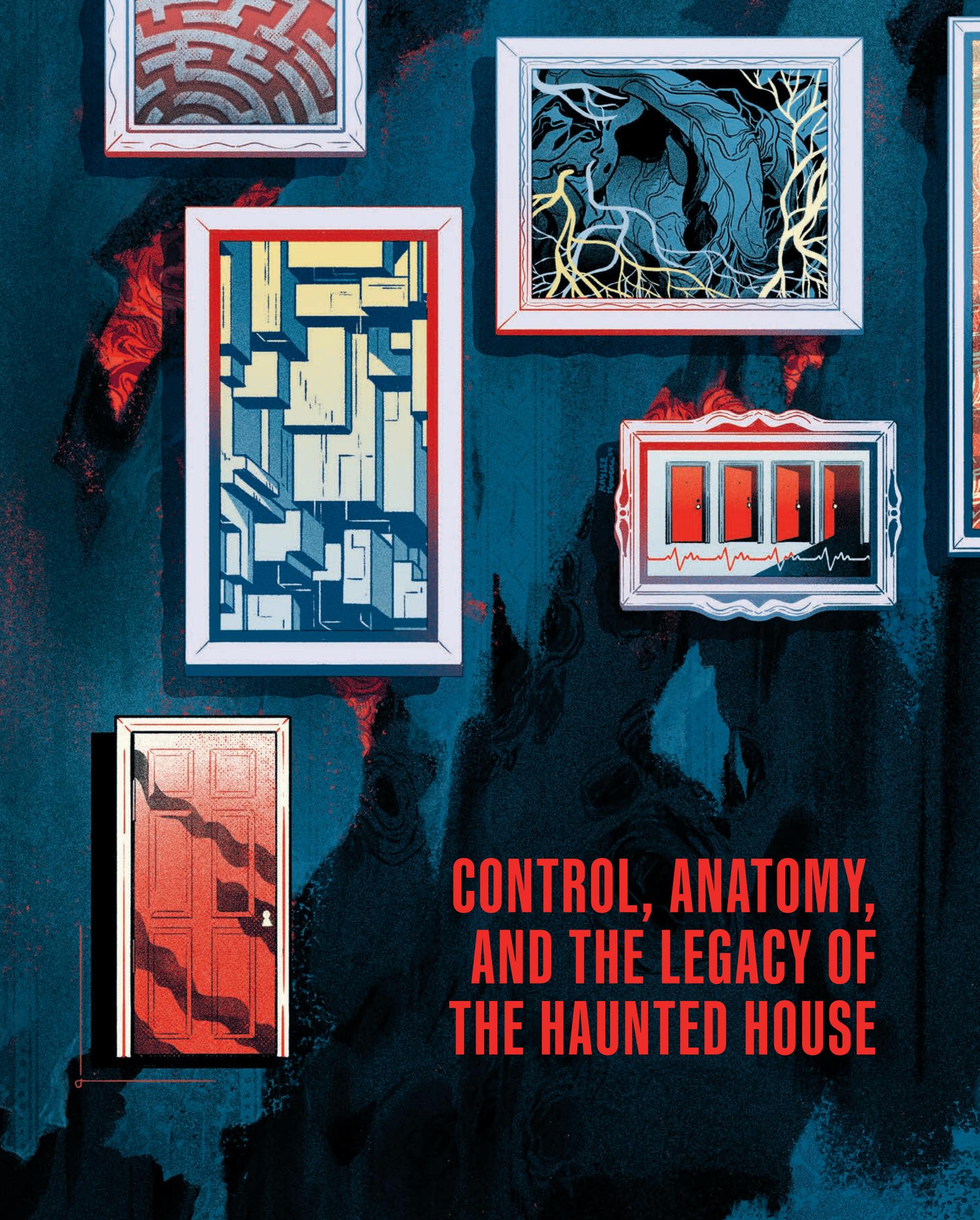
CONTROL, ANATOMY, AND THE LEGACY OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE

CONTROL, ANATOMY, AND THE LEGACY OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE

20th essay published
September 6, 2019

Subscribers at time of video's release
76,306

Views at time of book's publication
1.4 million

A world of made is not a world of born.

E. E. Cummings, 1944
"pity this busy monster, manunkind"

GARETH DAMIAN MARTIN

(they/them)

Gareth Damian Martin is a writer, game designer, and artist. They are the creator of *In Other Waters* and *Citizen Sleeper* and have been nominated for multiple IGF Awards, a GDC Award, and four BAFTAs. They are the editor of *Heterotopias*, an independent zine about games and architecture, and hold a PhD in literature from Royal Holloway, University of London.

FOREWORK

By Gareth Damian Martin

[FOREWORK] It is a pleasure to write this foreword, Jacob. Apologies for the earlier mistake, I mistyped.

Before we begin, Jacob, let's build a house. It will be helpful to us later. This page is a field, a desert. Like the desert, it is made of pieces in unity, grains that all differ in shape but cohere by category. One grain, many grains. One desert, many deserts. One field, many fields. One page, many pages.

In the psychology of the modern, civilized human being, it is difficult to overstate the **significance of the house.**[1]

I've tried to explain Kitty Horrorshow's *Anatomy* many times. I've gone for the literal approach — "It's a game where you pick up cassette tapes around a house and listen to them in the kitchen." That, shockingly, doesn't turn many heads. I've also tried the hyperbolic. "It's the single scariest game I've ever played." This is true, I absolutely mean it. But inevitably people look at the game, look at me, and go, **"This?"**[2]

Here's what I've settled on. *Anatomy* is when you were a kid, and everyone else had gone to bed and you were the last one downstairs. It's when you looked up, realized that it was your job to turn the lights off, and realized that this meant being alone in the dark of your living room for excruciatingly long seconds. *Anatomy* is the terrified sprint I did up the stairs after switching off the last lamp, unsure of exactly what I was running *from*, but absolutely confident that the dark living room was no longer a safe space. But in *Anatomy*, there are no covers to jump under, and even worse, *Anatomy* tells you that **those covers were never safe to begin with.**[3]

"In the psychology of the modern civilized human being, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the house." These opening lines of *Anatomy* acutely describe the themes at play here and differentiate it from other brands of horror. There are no ghosts or dead ancestors in the game, no werewolves or vampires or zombies. As a matter of fact, there's no one else at all. There's you, and there's *the house*.

why do human beings of our modern age foster this tremendous sympathy // sympathy // sympathy // sympathy // THERE IS AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION THAT MUST BE DRAWN BETWEEN THE WORDS "DISSECTION" AND "VIVISECTION," A DISTINCTION THAT WOULD APPEAR TO BE LOST ON YOU

The number of stories about "haunted houses" might as well be infinite, but I want to make a crucial distinction here. There are many, many stories about houses that are haunted *by* something. These are ghost stories, poltergeists, slashers. In those stories, the house is simply a house, unfortunately built on top of a graveyard or inhabited by people who decide to murder each other. And all that, while sometimes supernatural, is pretty distinctly *human*. Human emotions, left behind after a traumatic event. Human customs of disrespect, like building a house on a graveyard, reaping the consequences of their blasphemy.

The line is a wall. The first stroke is a division, the desert drawn into two distinct positions. The second stroke is a fortification of those positions. The house occurs at 3 strokes and grows outward from there.

This will be our house:

[ ]

In noting it here, we bring it into being. In this sense it is the first house, or, if you prefer, the oldest house.

1
I hold this opening monologue from *Anatomy* in the same esteem as Jackson's first paragraph of *The Haunting of Hill House*. Both are some of the best horror writing ever penned. Incidentally, after publishing this video, Kitty Horrorshow actually confirmed to me that *Hill House* was "the whole inspiration for *Anatomy*." In a rare feat of double confirmation, Remedy has also confirmed to me that *House of Leaves* was one of its main inspirations for *Control*. Reader, I nailed it.

2
I first played *Anatomy* after watching Quintin Smith talk about it on "Cool Ghosts," the gaming YouTube channel he shared with Matt Lees. It's an excellent video that ends with Smith lying down under a playground swing after deciding he's too scared of his house to go back inside.

3
In that first playthrough of *Anatomy*, I came to a brutal realization about horror media — the worst thing you can do is *start* a horror game (or movie, or book), but quit before you finish it. I reached the midpoint of *Anatomy*, got too scared, exited the game, and then spent that entire night petrified by the experience of being alone in my bedroom. By failing to finish *Anatomy*, failing to get closure, the game remained *alive* and dangerous in my subconscious. The next day, I swallowed my fears, fully completed the game, and got an almost-restful night of sleep.

[DISSECTION VS VIVISECTION] Jacob, is this a vivisection or a dissection? Are the words on this page living or dead? I want to ask you if your videos are a moment in time crystallized or if they emerge only when watched, each time imprinting themselves anew. I ask because the distinction is important here. I want to know what it is that I am cutting into. Living flesh or dead. I will try to be gentle either way.

"When it was at its height, it seemed like a
fortified town, with bastions all round it,
these bastions being colored most gorgeously.
If I put my pen into the space where there
was this dimness, I could not see it at all;
I could not even distinguish the color of
the ink at the end. All the interior of the
fortification, so to speak, was boiling or
rolling about in a most wonderful manner,
as if it were some thick liquid all alive."

On a Distinct Form of Transient Hemiopsia,
Hubert Airey

[NOISES] Jacob, in my anatomy of the house I have found that the first thing we find is noise. It is the kind of noise that only emerges in "silence." I put the quotes here around silence because silence is always conditional, relative to the level of noise, and beneath it there is always more noise, not more silence.

In your video, there are many layers of noise, visual and audible. I think you found the same thing as I: that the house is a container for meaning, but it cannot help also being a container for noise.

In our house, silence is a descent through layer after layer of noise. Each one becoming apparent to you and then fading away to reveal yet more noise. If you are in a house now stop to listen, Jacob. Can you hear how there is no silence, just more layers of noise?

This is the noise we find inside the house. Let me provide you with a diagram. The noise is indeterminate, and so we will use the tilde (~) as its sign:

[~]

This is our notation for the house.

[INFINITE] Jacob, you are right to imply the house always exists in relation to infinity. Here, our house:

[~]

See how it creates an interior on the infinite page. That is how the house was intended to be, a refuge from the terrible infinities of the world. A place of surrounding walls, where what is contained is sense (meaning), and what is excluded is noise (non-meaning). But as we have already discovered, the first thing found in the house is noise.

This indicates an important truth: a little piece of infinity got trapped inside the house when we built it. First, we indicated this with a single space. Then we indicated it with the tilde, the sign of indeterminacy. That which we do not know. But this small piece of infinity is isolated from the rest of its body. It is adrift in a sea of meaning. It is noise bounded by signal, by sense. This has a specific effect, it makes our piece of infinity ingrown, looped. Not expansive, but a sign turned back on itself. A word repeated so many times it breaks the boundaries of sense. To notate this presence we simply need to take the tilde, and follow its suggested shape, carry its ends on until they connect. In doing so we notate the house like this:

[∞]

"The house enlarges itself around me. The
invasion of light which revealed its true
dimensions has now reached the ground floor.
To keep my bearings I have been forced to
retreat into the kitchen, where I have moved
my mattress and blankets. Now and then I
venture into the hall and search the looming
perspectives. It amazes me that Margaret and
I once lived in this vast pile and so reduced
it in our minds."

The Enormous Space, J.G Ballard

These are the haunted houses that can be easily replicated, made into a Halloween thrill or **a ride at the state fair.**[4] If a house is haunted *by* something, then that something can jump out at you and yell "boo!"

But there's another kind of house. And while this kind may have provided a stage for violence, death, and insanity from humans, those acts were symptoms, not the cause. Some houses just...reject humanity.

[INHABITANTS] Our house can expand to make room for any number of individuals. Please compare:

[||||∞]

[||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||∞]

The house itself is not changed by these inhabitants, it comfortably contains any number. If you will oblige me, Jacob, I will place you into the house to demonstrate:

[|∞]

There you are.

The totality of the game *Control* takes place in a labyrinthian expanse of concrete and bureaucracy. This building is home to the fictitious government agency "The Federal Bureau of Control," and at first glance appears far more corporate than most haunted locales. But this place isn't called "Brutalist Office Number 34" or "The Pentagon." It's called "The Oldest House." And once you start thinking about *Control* as taking place in a haunted house, **things start to click into place.**[5]

The Oldest House is a bizarrely elusive building — despite being in the middle of New York, it can only be found by someone specifically looking for it. The Bureau of Control didn't build it, nor do they have the knowledge to recreate it. The Bureau calls The Oldest House "a place of power," a location "acted on by paranatural forces." And in a way, I find this terminology almost cute. They're assigning words to things they truly can't understand, trying to tie a logic to a place that is, by every definition, illogical. They found a haunted house and set up a government agency in it, but at every turn, they're just reminded how little they know about where they've placed themselves.

There is a staggering level of documentation in *Control*, every phenomenon recorded, every quirk of time and space written down. But paradoxically, this volume of data just shows how *little* the bureau actually knows. It all just reads as grasping at straws. "We observed this event. It could mean this. Or it could, uhh, not."

About halfway through the game, you find a man staring at a fridge. He calls out to you, panicked, "I can't look away! Unless someone has eyes on it, it changes!" He's been looking at this fridge for about 24 hours.

This is not an agency that's in command of the situation. This is a bunch of people who have trapped themselves in a house and tried to convince themselves that this was their plan all along.

In Leviticus 14:37 — sorry, it's just very hard for me to say a line like that seriously. Okay. So. Leviticus 14 is all about leprosy. What do you do if a guy gets leprosy, and

4

I always go on the scary funhouse rides at the state fair. They're always terrible. I love it.

5

My writing process for this video was unusual, and I don't think I'd recommend it. I was very excited about the release of *Control* and knew from the game's marketing that it took place within some location called "The Oldest House." Without knowing any more than that, I started writing an essay about haunted houses *before Control was even released*, leaving giant chunks of the script blank and hoping I'd find things within the game to write about. Fortunately, my gamble paid off; *Control* provided ample substance to fill those blanks. I released the video only a week and a half after *Control's* release, a ridiculous timeline given I had no early access to the game. Nowadays, I generally sit on games for months (if not years) before writing about them!

Anatomy's malignant basement

you don't have modern medicine, and you don't really know what leprosy is? Well, apparently, you shave and get clean, smear yourself with lamb's blood and olive oil, and hope. That's all well and fine. But then it gets weird. **Or, weirder.**[6]

Because in 14:37, it describes what to do when a house gets leprosy. A house! It describes a kohen, basically a rabbi, coming to the house and inspecting it.

```
"And he shall look at the lesion. Now, [if] the lesion in the
walls of the house consists of dark green or dark red sunken
looking stains, appearing as if deeper than the wall,"
```

And then we go on to describe what to do with a leprous house — you scrape its walls, you abandon it for days, and if the lesions return after all that,

```
"Now, [if] the lesion in the house has spread, it is malignant
tzara'ath in the house; it is unclean."
```

And then you're supposed to demolish the house — there's no coming back from that. In literal terms, this is probably black mold, which *is* dangerous and *is* cause for vacating a house. But I'm fascinated by how it's **portrayed here.**[7] The house itself is personified, and malignant. It's leprous. And like leprous people in that day, it's dealt with by excommunication. There's this notion that there's something "alive" about the house. But the only way they knew how to deal with it was just wait for it to die. And houses don't die easily. They just wait.

```
What happens to a house when it is left alone? It becomes worn, and
aged. When its paint peels, its foundation begins to sink. It goes
for too long unlived in. What does it think of? What does it dream?
```
Anatomy

There's no subtle way to put this; the house in *Anatomy* hates you. And maybe it hates you, *Henry.*[8] But moreso, it just hates humanity. It hates that you, as a collective,

6

Sometimes if I was bored at Shabbat services at my childhood synagogue, I would leaf through a translated copy of the Torah and look for interesting passages. The leprosy section was a favorite of mine. My father (page 148) is an environmental toxicologist and also loved talking about the leprous house for what should be obvious reasons.

7

For my bar mitzvah, I had to write a mini sermon on a different architecture-focused section of the Torah: Exodus 25: 1-9; 31-40, which focused on the materials used to build the tabernacle. As a matter of fact, that bar-mitzvah sermon was probably the first architecture essay I ever wrote. Given how many words I've devoted to the shape and style of buildings in my adult life, this was either a fun coincidence or a sign from God.

8

This was the first video I released to over 10k subscribers (it came out immediately after my *Shadow of the Colossus* secret video). I was excited that there would be enough of an audience that perhaps multiple Henrys would feel personally targeted — including my best friend, who is named Henry. It's a dumb joke that doesn't really land, but this video came out in 2019; I was basically a toddler.

have left it to rot. It hates that you, collective, brought it into existence just to let it suffer through neglect.

It may grow angry. Its basement may fill with churning acid like an empty stomach, and its gorge may rise as it asks itself through clenched teeth, "What did I do wrong?". It may grow bitter. It may grow hungry. So hungry and so bitter that its scruples dissolve and its doors unlock themselves.

Anatomy

[DOCUMENTATION] I understand that our system of notation for the house might seem comical or even absurd. But be aware that it allows for the house to have a presence on the page beyond documentation.

I could describe the entryway, with its darkened upper balcony or the basement storm drains with their water-stained pillars. I could describe the director's office and the crime scene therein. But each of those would be a denatured piece of documentation, the words taking the place of the house which is more than able to speak for itself.

As you are inside the house already, you may listen:

[|∞]

Haunted houses are almost universally abandoned, at least temporarily. How many stories include a family moving into a lavish manor that's, for some reason, not been lived in for years? Typically the way the causality flows is that the house was haunted, so it was abandoned. But I love the idea of the inverse. The house was abandoned. And because of that, it's haunted.

There's a yōkai in old Japanese mythology, one called a Mokumokuren. If you've played *Nioh* or *Sekiro* you've probably run into them, sentient paper walls and umbrellas, with at least one eye and sometimes many more, and a nasty attitude. What's interesting about Mokumokuren is how they come about. They're not just random goblins that decide to move in. They're born from neglect. If a household object sits alone long enough, damaged and ignored, it gets feisty. And then, according to this legend, <mark>it grows eyes.</mark>[9]

Control spells this out about as plainly as it can. You're not in the young house, the spritely house, the house that was just built and can't wait to share itself with people! You're in The Oldest House. How long has this house sat empty? How has it dealt with the centuries of silence?

There is perhaps no better expression of this theme of abandonment than the opening paragraph of *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. It's one of the most effective openings I've ever read.

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

9
This section could have used more fleshing out. First off, *Sekiro* does not contain this specific kind of yōkai, something I should have realized since I've played through the game roughly 47,000 times. Also, unlike their depiction in *Nioh*, yōkai aren't always dangerous. Instead, the supernatural eyes that grow out of old walls ("Mokumokuren") and other discarded household items (more broadly, "Tsukumogami") simply *watch* whoever happens to be spending time in the abandoned house.

[THIS WAS THEIR PLAN] Jacob, please disregard my earlier questions regarding dissection vs vivisection. Now I understand. This is a haunting. I will adjust accordingly.

"Good-evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [Pause.] Good-evening. Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [Pause.] It will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens. [Pause.] Look [Long pause.] the familiar chamber. [Pause.] at the far end a window. [Pause.] On the right the indispensable door. [Pause.]"
Ghost Trio, Samuel Beckett

[DEEPER THAN THE WALL] Jacob, I think I need to provide you with a small but useful set of diagrams, for later use:

| [∞]

[|∞]

 [∞] |

Here we see the passage of the individual from outside the house (line 1) to inside the house (line 2) to inside the house, "deeper than the wall" (line 3)

Now, Jacob, you might say that this diagram shows the individual passing into and through the house. If so, I must clarify something. We read the line from left to right. So when you are to the right of the house it has already occurred. You cannot leave in that direction, you can only go deeper than the wall. Let's continue from here.

"Watch out. The gap in the door… it's a separate reality."
P.T.

[EXISTENCE] Jacob, I have some concerns. Now that we have created our house, it is tied to our existence. When we divided the page we did so with the authority of sense, of meaning. Here is meaning, we said, and over there is noise. But the house has begun to ask questions to which we do not have the answer.

In what sense is the house distinct from the page? I am struggling to answer this question. I worry that in the wide and endless entropic space of the page, infinity runs freely, not catching or settling anywhere. But within the walls of the house, that little piece has begun to fester. Infinity is settling in the corners, building up against the walls.

"The house begins to resemble an advanced mathematical surface, a three-dimensional chessboard. The pieces have yet to be placed, but I feel them forming in my mind."
The Enormous Space, J.G Ballard

Jacob, in the house versus humanity where do you place yourself? This feels like an important question. Do we resent our existence, or resent our creator? Is this what haunts the house, the resentment of a creature abandoned by its creator? In *Resident Evil*, George Trevor, the Spencer Mansion's architect, is eaten by the house. Why then is it not satisfied?

Do you have children, Jacob? I am asking because when I put my daughter to sleep she wants me to stay in the room. This is a problem because once she is asleep, when I move to leave the room, the creaking floorboards of the house betray me and wake her up. She cannot sleep when I am not in the room, but once asleep, if I leave the room she will wake up.

It is a game of presence and absence, like the haunted house. If we leave the house empty it surely becomes haunted, but it is only on entry that it wakes up to haunt us. The haunted house is the inverse of my family house. When I leave she wakes, when I stay she sleeps. When the haunted house is entered it wakes, and when we leave it sleeps.

But *how* does a house, angry and haunted, express itself? What can it do when it's not full of ghosts, not echoing forgotten humanity but emoting in a different dimension altogether?

The answer is that the house's structure itself starts going *wrong*. Wrong in ways that feel impossible. In *Hill House*, the architecture constantly seems to fight its inhabitants. They can barely walk to the kitchen without getting lost in the downstairs, a labyrinth of concentric circles, with doors that never stay open and **unexpected turns in every corner.**[10]

Eleanor shook herself, turning to see the room complete. It had an unbelievably faulty design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length. **The Haunting of Hill House**

Anatomy does this much more overtly — in subsequent playthroughs, as the house starts to degrade, things "break" in a very game-y sense. The mirror is sideways in the bathroom, plates sit well above the surface of the table. Dark lines seep in through the walls.

This concept is taken to the absolute extreme in the shifting walls of *Control*, which move in front of our eyes. As Jesse goes through The Oldest House, she finds sections of the building she can reclaim. When she does, enormous blocks of concrete retreat into the walls, settling into a somewhat predictable pattern. But what if Jesse never came? What if the walls had been allowed to just continue growing, **swallowing up the hallways and lobbies until there was nothing left?**[11]

In **Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*,**[12] a man — Will Navidson — discovers that the house his family moves into has been allowed to grow unchecked for quite some time. He first notices this in a minor, but impossible, architectural anomaly. His house is very slightly larger on the inside than the outside. He measures again and again — the outside of the house is 32 feet, nine and three-quarter inches. The inside is 32 feet ten inches exactly. This shouldn't be true, this can't be true, and yet Navidson can't find any other explanation.

That quarter inch soon becomes the least of his obsessions. A few weeks after their move, a door appears in his living room. A door that definitely hadn't been there before. A door that — given its position — should lead directly into the backyard.

[ABSOLUTE REALITY] I have more concerns, Jacob. I can't see how you can leave the house. I think I was too eager to place you within it. If you followed my previous diagram you would see that it is impossible to leave the house once entered. Any movement along the line will take you deeper into the space that comes after the house occurred. Any movement back along the line places you before the house occurred, and therefore unaware of it.

It seems the house stretches deeper than I first thought.

10

The writing of this essay is the first time I remember feeling the now-familiar spark of *connection*, unexpectedly finding a perfect link between multiple pieces of art in different mediums by different artists. This is the single best, most exciting part of writing for me, the feeling that I've stumbled onto almost a secret language between artists. When I realized all of my favorite haunted house stories include details of the house being architecturally "wrong," I think I literally got goosebumps.

11

This concept pairs neatly with the uncontrollably growing teeth featured in *Anatomy*. Leprosy is the featured disease in this essay, but these descriptions of a house basically swallowing itself are far more cancerous. I once heard a pithy description of cancer that went "cancer is what happens when cells forget how to die." This essay's spin should be fairly easy to figure out: hauntings are what happens when a house forgets how to die.

12

Writer Ian Danskin (featured on page 24) keeps a running list of YouTube essayists who have a visible copy of *House of Leaves* somewhere in the background of their video. The list includes Mike Rugnetta, Laura Crone, Jessie Gender…and me of course. Not for this essay, however! *House of Leaves* instead shows up in my video "The Shape of Infinity," featured prominently in a towering stack of books. I don't explicitly reference the book in that essay — I just thought the reference was cute.

In an early scene in *Control*, bodies float inside The Oldest House

13

Of all my essays, this one seems to have inspired the most artistic projects from other people. Off the top of my head, I've received drawings, songs, short stories, academic essays, comics, and an officially published tabletop role-playing game with a 300-page guide ("The Darkest House," Monte Cook Games) that have all been at least partially inspired by my writing on haunted houses. It is tremendously flattering, to say the least. I also feel a healthy dose of imposter syndrome, being cited by all these projects. I sometimes struggle to rationalize how people can be inspired by my essays, when said essays often boil down to explaining pre-existing themes in other works of art. Shouldn't they be inspired by the subjects of the essay, rather than my synthesis?

But in this instance, I think I understand. In connecting the dots between the ideas of sentient, malevolent houses, this essay makes the case for a fairly specific understanding of "haunted." I think that understanding — only evident when shown through many different examples — is what inspired all those previously-mentioned artworks.

But it doesn't. Instead, the door opens onto a dark, cold hallway, one that stretches far into the impossible depths of the house.

Remember the house with leprosy? With the lesions in the walls? Let's revisit that passage for a second because the translation is:

"Now, the lesion in the walls of the house consists of dark green or dark red sunken looking stains, **appearing as if deeper than the wall,**"

Deeper than the wall! Thousands of years ago, in a story about a house with a human disease, we've got an example of the exact same kind of impossible dimensions.

Now, listen. I know there are a number of ways that line can be taken, some that are more logical, some that make more real-life sense. But I just can't let go of this idea[13] of physics-defying architecture. *Hill House*, with its malicious rooms and confounding layout. The Oldest House, growing cement like a tumor, smothering itself. The house on Ash Tree Lane, with its miles-long hallway. A house malignant, boiling with leprosy, with lesions deeper than its walls.

There are countless things we can't control in life — the weather, who we love, the actions of our nations' leaders. Maybe for that reason, it's all the more important that we feel in control of where we live. If we don't feel at ease in our own bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, then where would we?

And it's hard to appreciate these things while they're normal. A living room is just a living room, a hallway is just a hallway. They provide comfort by being exactly what we expect them to be. Only when they change, when they go through the insidious mutations described in these stories, do we realize just how much trust we put in our houses.

In the hauntings of *Hill House* and *Anatomy*, the least safe places of all are the bedrooms.

"This is where they want me to sleep," Eleanor thought incredulously; "what nightmares are waiting, shadowed, in those high corners?"

The stories force us to consider just how vulnerable we are in our house, how intimate our connection has to be to where we sleep. Each night we shut our senses to the world for hours at a time, says *Anatomy*.

"Anything might stand beside us, watch us, keep us company until dawn, and we would never perceive it. **We can only pray that the house will not let such things carry on as we sleep.**"[14]

For our house to turn against us, it's more than just an immediate danger — it's a *betrayal*. There's even a recurring motif of being consumed by the house, like we're willingly placing ourselves in the jaws of a beast and relying on the beast to not eat us for another day. Jesse worries that The Oldest House will swallow her alive, Eleanor feels she's "a small creature swallowed by a monster." As *Anatomy* points out:

"When a house is both hungry and awake, every room becomes a mouth."

And yet, what I find most interesting about these houses is that they're just *irresistible* to us. Eleanor leaves her life behind specifically to go to Hill House and ultimately decides she's never going to leave it. Jesse spends years looking for The Oldest House, reflecting that — despite everything — it feels like home. *Anatomy* actually shuts itself down over and over again. *You make* the decision to keep going back, to revisit the house, to walk down that dark hallway one last time.

In the end of Navidson's story in *House of Leaves*, he commits himself completely to the dark, impossible hallway in his living room. Taking just a bike and a cart full of supplies, he rides into the hallway for hours, days, weeks. He travels

"…silent rooms where one's footsteps are absorbed by carpets so thick, so heavy, that no sound reaches one's ear, as if the very ear of him walks on … once again along those corridors, through these salons and galleries in this edifice of a bygone era, this sprawling, sumptuous, baroque, gloomy hotel, where one endless corridor follows another, silent empty corridors, heavy with cold, dark woodwork, stucco, moulded panelling, marble, black mirrors, dark-toned portraits, columns, sculpted door-frames, rows of doorways, galleries, side corridors, that in turn lead to empty salons, salons heavy with ornamentation of a bygone era … as if the ground were still sand or gravel or flagstones over which I walked once again … as if in search of you between walls laden with woodwork … among which even then I was waiting for you … far from this setting in which I now find myself standing before you waiting for the man who will not be coming now, who is not likely to come now to part us again, to tear you away from me. Will you come?"
Last Year at Marienbad, **Alain Robbe-Grillet**

[DEEPER THAN THE WALL]

| [∞]

[|∞]

[∞] |

[∞] |

[∞] |

[∞] |

14

I am afraid of the dark, specifically of seeing something horrible in the darkness of my bedroom. I've felt this for as long as I can remember and seeing it spelled out so clearly in *Hill House* and *Anatomy* was like hearing someone else describe my own personal boogeyman. My childhood bedroom was at the top of a flight of stairs. I vividly remember staring down into those shadows and worrying what the darkness would become when I closed my eyes. This fear wasn't helped by one particularly frightening story I read ("The Voice," *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*), in which a disembodied voice announces it's making its way up the stairs. **"Ellen, I'm on the top step. Now I'm in the hall. Now I'm outside your room."** Although the story ends without the voice actually hurting anyone, I could never get that image of *something* approaching me through the dark out of my head.

"I realized that all that was taking place
around me was not the trick of an inflamed
imagination, not the veil of delirium,
through which unwelcome glimpses of my
supposedly real existence in a distant
European city (the wallpaper, the armchair,
the glass of lemonade) were trying to show.
I realized that the obtrusive room was
fictitious, since everything beyond death
is, at best, fictitious: an imitation of life
hastily knocked together, the furnished rooms
of nonexistence."

Terra Incognita, **Vladimir Nabokov**

―――

[A LIVING ROOM] Jacob, you can't have said living
room by accident. I am listening over and over, to
look for that moment of recognition in your voice. Are
you teasing me? A living room is just a living room.
This must be a joke. This is a serious matter. I am
becoming worried now.

―――

"I return to my ritual perambulations. My
movements through the house have become
as formalized as ballet and I feel that
I have become an essential part of some
incomprehensible biological process. The
house is an organism, hungry for madness. It
is the maze that dreams. And I am lost."

*Batman: Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on
Serious Earth,* **Grant Morrison**

―――

[SLEEP] Jacob how ate your dreams? Sorry, I mistyped.
How are your dreams? Personally mine are vivid, spatial.
But they are never houses, only endless mazes. Do you
dream of houses Jacob?

―――

[HOUSE OF LEAVES] I think you forgot something
here Jacob, Navidson burns his pages one by one when
the end comes. He burns the book itself, the house of
leaves. Here we are in our house of leaves, I have joined
you. Feel the paper under your fingers. How beautifully

it would burn. Here is our house now, both of us inside.
Resolute. I would recommend you burn it.

[‖∞]

Before it gets any older.

―――

"Everything around me was fading, leaving
bare the scenery of death – a few pieces of
realistic furniture and four walls."
Terra Incognita, **Vladimir Nabokov**

―――

[A HAUNTING]

[‖∞] |

I keep thinking of my daughter. Waking up when I leave
the room, sleeping when I stay. In this situation, there is
no way I can be outside the room and she is ALSO asleep
at the same time. Like I said, a big problem.

[‖∞] |

But what if the same is true of the haunted house? It
cannot be both empty and haunted at the same time. We
must ALSO be in the house while it is haunted.

[‖∞] |

Another thought Jacob, one that came to me suddenly
now, watching your video. Scrubbing back and forth
through time. If we can move forwards along the line,
left to right, into the house, can an individual come
from the right? Can something enter the house from
that deep place beyond the wall? If so, what would that
individual be?

[‖∞|]

Jacob, can you adjust the light? There is a figure there
across the table. Ah, I can see them now. Jacob, I'm glad
you made it back here.

hundreds of miles. He submits completely to the house — he has no map, no sense of direction, no plan. **He simply goes, in one of the most inhospitable environments imaginable.**[15]

It's almost always a plot point that these houses are old — an ancient manor, an ageless labyrinth, a building literally named *The Oldest House*. And though theoretically, we know that all of these must have been built by people at some point, at the same time, they *couldn't* have been, right? In both *House of Leaves* and *Control*, it's even made explicit — these are by all accounts older than human civilization. I said at the beginning that these houses weren't haunted *by* anything, not ghosts or ghouls or gremlins. But I don't think that's quite right. Despite all their efforts to the contrary — their impossible architecture, their threats of betrayal, their lesions in the walls — *we* keep coming back. We keep exploring them and charting them and trying to bend their distinctively un-human design to our will.

These houses are haunted — they're haunted by us.[16]

```
"This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying
together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its
builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines
and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without
concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never
meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love
or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house;
Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed."
```
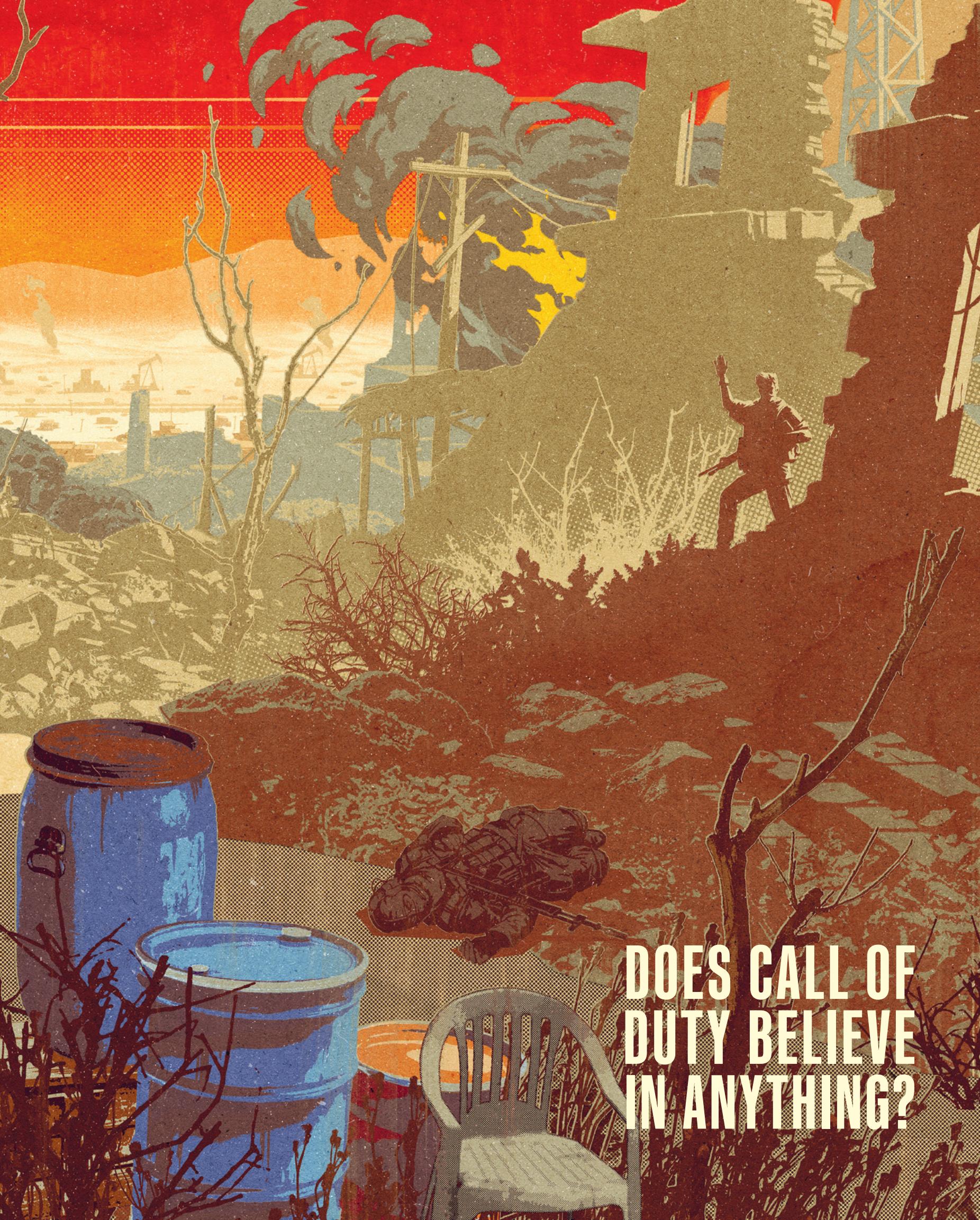***The Haunting of Hill House***

DOES CALL OF
DUTY BELIEVE
IN ANYTHING?

DOES CALL OF DUTY BELIEVE IN ANYTHING?

24th essay published
December 14, 2019

Subscribers at time of video's release
133,910

Views at time of book's publication
1.7 million

Some time after the looting, the locked gates, the US tank stood idle in a gallery

Amanda Dalton, 2012
"Untidiness"

1

A slightly confusing opening title card. The title of the video, "Does Call of Duty Believe in Anything?" would have been stronger text to blast onscreen. The "We Need to Talk About" format was a popular way of framing arguments at the time — now I think it feels a little dated.

```
"Bravo 6 moving to the first floor"
"Is this game political?"
"No"
"Really?"
"No"
"We're just making games"
"That seems insane"
"It seems insane to get political to me"
```

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT CALL OF DUTY'S POLITICS[1]

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare released on October 25, 2019, and sold $600 million worth of games in its first three days. That is, if we're keeping track, roughly double the amount *Avengers: Endgame* made in North America in the same amount of time. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is the ninth Call of Duty developed by Infinity Ward, and the 16th Call of Duty game released in the last 16 years. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is the fourth game in the Call of Duty series to be called *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Unlike the previous year's game, *Black Ops: Confusion About Roman Numerals*, this fourth *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* has a single-player campaign, a redux of the first *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's* campaign, with similarly named characters in totally new situations (still with me?).

And if you followed *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*'s marketing, you'll know that Infinity Ward wanted you to know that this single-player campaign was about *modern warfare*. It's not your daddy's modern warfare or the modern warfare you played 12 years ago. This is a story about proxy wars, about non-state actors, and serious acts of terrorism.

"These are morally complex stories, where there is no black and white, or pure evil or pure good. It's the gray in the middle of all that, and finding your line is a hard thing to determine," says narrative director Taylor Kurosaki.

This game deals with some capital-T Themes. Themes like: "Colonialism, and occupation, and independence, and freedom." BUT. While this is a game about modern warfare, about colonialism, about occupied countries, about the meaning of freedom, there's one thing it's not. "Is this game political?" "No."

Hmm.

So to be fair, "Is *this thing* political?" is a question that can be interpreted many different ways. And, to their credit, the writers of *Modern Warfare* actually gave us a pretty direct explanation of what they feel their game would have to be in order to be political.

Jacob Minkoff: "If you wanted a situation where I would say, 'Yes, it is a political story,' I would have to be telling a story about specifically the exact administrations and governments and events in our world today…"

So, there we go, a straightforward definition of what it means to them to have a political story. It would have to be specifically about the exact administrations and events in our world today. Now look. Everyone can have an opinion on this sort of thing, but I feel like we can also recognize that this definition is absurd. Let's list some stories that ARE NOT **political by this definition:**[2]

House of Cards, *The West Wing*, *Veep*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *1984*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *Animal Farm*, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Huck Finn*.

By this definition, Jacob Minkoff has made the idea of "political allegory" impossible. There ain't room for

2
This is the critical equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel. Minkoff's quote doesn't present a complex point of view, it's just laughably, obviously, incorrect. But that being said, this list of "non-political" media still makes me laugh a lot. While editing the video, I had the sudden urge to pair it with the theme to *NPR*'s long-running comedy show *Wait Wait…Don't Tell Me!* If Peter Sagal (the show's host) ever watches this video, I think he'd find it funny too.

POLITICAL TRIPWIRES

In the original *Game Informer* interview, Kurosaki follows this list of themes by saying, "We don't say those words specifically, but that's the realm that we are in." This actually mirrors a strategy I've used in my writing. The segment of the audience primed to be angry at the inclusion of "politics" often only understands politics as a series of buzzwords. My essay on headshots ("Rationalizing Brutality: The Cultural Legacy of the Headshot*)* devotes its final few minutes to the topic of police brutality. Many commenters have complained that the essay "gets political at the end." The previous twenty minutes were filled with stories of presidential assassinations, oppressive medical procedures, and extrajudicial executions. These events are, of course, as political as any police action. But because I didn't frame them using modern political buzzwords ("the WOKE assassination of John F. Kennedy"), they didn't set off those people's politics-detecting tripwires.

Call of Duty could actually use this phenomenon to its advantage. Because its audience is so large and assured of the franchise's non-politics, Call of Duty *could* tell a meaningful story about colonialism, occupation, and independence. It could interrogate the United States' history as an occupying force, examine how the tools of modern warfare are used by colonizers and by the colonized. The series could do this without actually *using* those words, sneakily pushing players to think about topics they might otherwise avoid. But you can't do that while denying that your game has any perspective at all.

metaphors in this definition. Either you're saying "Donald Trump told me to do this," or your story *is not political.*

There's the cynical way of taking this, of course. It's all marketing language. They know that gamers are sick of having those pesky SJW politics forced into their games about uhh, imperialism. A quick glance at the comments on this *Game Informer* video confirms it — hundreds of people celebrating the fact that this game isn't political. The cynical take is that these writers don't actually care what they're saying, or the publishers have told them to "Keep out of politics." Whatever it takes, as long as it sells copies and keeps their fanbase happy.

But I think that they feel sincere. And moreover, even if they do have ulterior motives for claiming apoliticism, this interpretation paints a fascinating picture of Call of Duty's base assumptions about the military and **the world we live in.³**

First things first though-

What the hell is *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* about?

The plot,⁴ in the broadest possible strokes: In a fictional Middle East country named Urzikstan, many forces are vying for control. There's a hostile invasion from Russia, there's a fictional terrorist group called Al-Qatal, and there's the Urzik Militia. After terrorist attacks in the non-fictional city of London and the looming threat of chemical weapons by Russian forces, a number of SAS and CIA agents team up with members of the Urzik Militia to stop...to stop the bad guys.

I played the game, like, two days ago, but writing out those three sentences was weirdly difficult. And there's a good reason for that! *Modern Warfare* is a game about individuals. We don't spend time with the "Urzik Militia" really, we spend time with Farah. She's a leader in the group. She's absolutely committed to her people. As a child, her father was killed during a chemical weapon attack by Russian forces. She hates the invading Russians, she hates chemical weapons, she hates being controlled. I remember her character far more than I remember exactly what she was trying to do.

Same with Captain John Price, a mustachioed SAS captain who knows that doing the right thing often means getting his hands dirty, but that's a burden he's willing to take.

`"We get dirty, and the world stays clean."`

Or CIA Officer Alex, who empathizes so strongly with the Urzik militia's plight that he literally leaves his post to go fight with them. Or Hadir, Farah's brother, who fights just as passionately for independence, but is put at odds with Farah and the rest of the squad when he uses chemical weapons against Russian forces.

This focus on character over story is very much *Modern Warfare's* intent, I think. The writers said many times that they wanted you to "empathize with the

individual." This is the story about the morally gray, remember? And you know what? That's fine! Wars, especially the proxy wars this story is ostensibly about, are fought by individuals. Including freedom fighters like Farah humanizes parts of a conflict we often think about only in broad strokes.

But *Modern Warfare* seems to think by sidelining real-life "government and administrations and events" in favor of individuals, it's able to dodge politics. This isn't a story about *Congress* or *Parliament*, it's a story about people simply responding to the situations they're put in. In their mind, the personal *cannot be* political.

But simultaneously, there are also constant reminders of the many real-life wars that have been fought, and the many thinkers that have stemmed from them. At least, there are if you're bad at the game. I die, and Elie Wiesel tells me that "Nothing can, nothing will justify the murder of innocent people and helpless children."

I die, and Jean-Paul Sartre tells me that "When the rich wage war, it's the poor who die."

I die and Chris Kyle tells me that "It was my duty to shoot the enemy, and I do not regret it."

Are any of these quotes what the game is about? Not really. But it's what Call of Duty has done for years, drape itself in non-fictional accoutrement while insisting it can't function as a commentary on any of those things.

Modern Warfare uses real guns, real quotes, and one-half real countries. But "is this game political?" "No." Because there's a second part to Minkoff's definition that's probably even more important to their self-identification as non-political. Are you ready for it? Here we go.

`"...and governments and events in our world today. We are talking about thematic things. We would also have to have, I think, a perspective on it. And what we don't — we want to present the different perspectives,` **`we don't want to say one of them is correct."`**[5]

Perspective

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare does not have a perspective on modern warfare. That is their official position.

What...what do you even do with that?

`"Colonialism, and occupation, and independence, and freedom."`
`"We would also have to have, I think, a perspective on it."`

Is freedom good? Is war bad? This game has *no idea*! Come and play the game series named after the phrase we say when we're honoring soldiers, a series **COMPLETELY NEUTRAL ON THE IDEAS OF WAR.**[6]

5

The interviews I keep returning to were conducted by former *Game Informer* employee Ben Hanson (current occupations: host of the *The MinnMax Show*, being a very nice guy). At the time of the interview, the question "is this game political?" was having a moment: the creative director of *The Division 2* had recently insisted that their game, set in DC and depicting a modern civil war, was not making any political statements. Ben told me he somewhat regrets not drilling down even more on Infinity Ward's definition of political, but it's hard for me to imagine a more fruitful answer than what he got.

Ben also felt there was a small-scale culture clash within Infinity Ward at the time. Minkoff and Kurosaki "thought they were making some Naughty Dog-level shit," he said, but other old-school members of the team were more interested in making a game about "kicking ass." This is just another reason to not put too much weight on any one developer's interpretation of their art; games are made by huge teams of people, and those people might have very different visions of the final product.

6

Another way this essay differs from my usual output is how specifically critical it is of a single game — typically, my negativity is more broadly targeted (climate change, criminal justice system, etc.). This might be my only video about how badly a particular game drops the ball. I would only do this for a massive title like *Modern Warfare* — there's no fun in excoriating a five-person indie game.

I wasn't initially sure I even had anything novel to say on Call of Duty. "This series is military propaganda" is a completely rote observation, one that countless people have already written about. But while actually playing the game, I was struck by the way that the narrative's emphasis on "tough decisions and morally gray scenarios" only reinforced its propagandistic perspective. When I realized how closely the game's emphasis on this topic mirrored real-life military messaging, I knew I had an angle.

Alright, alright. So what's interesting here, taking them at their word, is what the writers of Call of Duty *think* a perspective-less story looks like.

Early on, there's a mission in *Modern Warfare* set in London. In the opening of the mission, Sergeant Kyle Garrick and the squad are tracking a potential terrorist group. He asks if there are snipers in place, and is told that they don't have backup because they "don't want to upset the public." Immediately afterward, terrorists detonate a van in the middle of Piccadilly Circus.

In the following mission, you-as-Garrick fight through the chaos. Terrorists are mixed in with the crowds — the mission is designed so it's exceedingly difficult to *not* accidentally shoot one of the dozens of fleeing civilians. Once all the terrorists are killed and cleanup begins, Garrick laments that this attack could have been prevented.

```
"You saved lives today sergeant."
"This shouldn't have happened in the first place, sir."
```

Garrick says that they had "actionable intel" to stop the attack because they had been tracking this terrorist cell for weeks. The reason him and his squad hadn't was because *they* — an unnamed *they* — weren't willing to take the gloves off.

```
"We don't stand a chance in hell with these rules of engagement,
Captain. They can tell us where, they can tell us when. Don't
tell us how. My men were tracking that cell for weeks."
```

Kyle Garrick has a perspective, clearly. He wants more autonomy for his individual squad, more leeway to use force, more resources allocated to homeland security and terror attack prevention. And it makes sense that he would feel this way; he just experienced the worst possible result of not having autonomy, leeway, and resources.

Call of Duty's writers say that they want to "present the different perspectives — we don't want to say one of them is correct."

But how are we, as an audience, supposed to take this scene? Garrick thinks that if his squad had the discretion to take out potential targets without higher approval, he would be able to prevent terrorist attacks, and in this scene, he is proven *right on every measure.*

Sure, the game doesn't force you, in real life, to agree with Garrick's point. But I have trouble thinking of a way it could more **persuasively frame him as correct.**[7]

The game's standout mission, "Clean House," presents a similarly implicit perspective. "Clean House" is, from a purely game-design perspective, a pretty remarkable achievement for Call of Duty. Far from bombastic, the mission is an incredibly tense and quiet path through a single house.

Every single room is its own separate encounter; every bathroom could have someone hiding in it, every blind corner is a potential bullet. And, just like Piccadilly Circus, civilians are mixed in with the terrorists — but even more so. In

this instance, a man is using a woman as a human body shield. Assuming you take him out cleanly, he lets go of the woman — who immediately lunges for a gun. **Surprise! She was a combatant too![8]**

In one of the rooms, there's a woman and a baby. Obviously, you shouldn't shoot them. In fact, if you shoot them multiple times, the game shows a message that says "Are You Serious?" and kicks you back to the main menu.

When you finish clearing the house, you find two things at the top — a treasure trove of information on terrorist activities and a detonator. If you hadn't shot that last woman, the whole house would have gone up in smoke.

Here, again, we have a level that presents a controversial real-life operation — in this case, no-knock raids — but also presents a "right" way through. If someone surrenders, you don't shoot them. If they have a gun, you do. There's even an achievement called "Golden Path" for going through the house perfectly, using one bullet per viable target. And at the end, it was absolutely worth it — you got information that led to saving lives!

Again, the game doesn't actually *force* you to agree with the actions of the characters here. You could play this level and be absolutely horrified that a state military would carry out this kind of action. You could, reasonably, point out that it's an understandable response to try and shoot back when you wake up and find your house full of men with guns. You *could* recognize that the "golden path" isn't perfect at all, that it's only really rewarding the efficient executions of **[KILL MONTAGE].[9]**

But if you were to do that, you would be fighting against every message that the game is giving you. In the game, if you alerted the people in the house that you were there, you never would have found that life-saving information. In the game, if you didn't shoot that woman in the head, she would have grabbed the detonator and killed everyone, mother and baby included. The game doesn't say *all* no-knock raids are effective. But it shows you one, and that one inarguably was.

Modern Warfare's writers think they're just presenting ideas here without a stance, just showing off the real situations that military operators might face. But their presentation of these situations, contextualized within the story as always appropriate and gamified with a *correct* way through, implicitly say otherwise.

DEPERSONALIZED DEATH

In 2007, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (the *first* "*Modern Warfare*") let players control the gunner of an AC-130 gunship in the now-famous mission "Death from Above." The level is chilling; rather than fighting on the ground, you slowly orbit the battlefield in an invincible plane and slaughter scores of enemy combatants with high-caliber aerial bombardment. It's one of the truest looks at "modern warfare" presented in the games: detached operators deciding which dots on a map should have their lives snuffed out. "Clean House" is a botched attempt at making another mission as impactful as "Death from Above." But could Call of Duty even produce a level with the resonance of "Death from Above" today? I'm not sure. 2022's *Modern Warfare 2* had another AC-130 set piece, a mission titled "Shadow Company." It didn't even try to recapture any of the disturbing energy of the original, instead opting for the bombastic destruction of an entire town. Maybe Call of Duty sensed that its audience wouldn't be affected by depersonalized death the way they were in 2007.

8

Not a new trick for the Call of Duty series — in 2010's *Black Ops*, the game sends you to assassinate Fidel Castro. The man, who turns out to be a *decoy* Castro, grabs a woman to use as a human shield. The exact same scenario plays out. Just another apolitical adventure! (This topic expanded on by Jamil Jan Kochai, page 70).

9

One of the first game reviews I ever wrote was about the minor indie game *Door Kickers Action Squad*. A retro spinoff of the more tactical Door Kickers series, *Action Squad* largely consists of taking your pixel-art squad on no-knock raids. While enemies would frequently take hostages that you were penalized for killing, I was mildly horrified to find that a consistent strategy was to simply shoot through the hostage; the hostages had more HP than the enemies and would usually survive. Gameplay mechanics always tell a story, whether they're an intentional part of the narrative or not.

You could write a whole book on how games market themselves through controversy, from the infamous *Daikatana* ad ("JOHN ROMERO'S ABOUT TO MAKE YOU HIS BITCH") to the *Dead Space 2* previews that promised "Your mom will hate this game." 2022's *Modern Warfare 2* even teased a remake of the infamous "No Russian" mission in a post-credits stinger, like Samuel Jackson was about to ask "No Russian" to join the Avengers.

For what it's worth, I haven't seen a single person talk about the new version of "No Russian" (featured in 2023's *Modern Warfare 3*) in which your character is forced to suicide bomb a passenger plane. It all feels a bit tired at this point.

11

A useful resource for this section on Call of Duty's controversies was the article "Critics and Developers Remember Call of Duty's Most Infamous Mission." Originally published on the now-defunct website *USGamer*, it was written by Caty McCarthy and...Blake Hester! The man's fingerprints are all over this essay.

12

This word choice is inspired in part by George Carlin's seminal standup routine on euphemisms. He traces how our language for battlefield trauma has lost its raw, evocative power. Starting as the brutally descriptive "shell shock," the term has progressively become more sanitized and clinical; from "shell shock" to "battle fatigue" to "operational exhaustion" to its current form, "post-traumatic stress disorder." It's about squeezing the humanity out of the phrase, he says. **"Eight syllables, we've added a hyphen, and the pain is completely buried under jargon."**

I also think "shell shock" is simply a more descriptive term for the particular experience Call of Duty conveys. Playing Call of Duty isn't a traumatic experience for me, but the game's hours of non-stop violence and explosions impair my ability to critically analyze its plot. Despite playing it immediately before writing this essay, I had to repeatedly watch the game's story missions on YouTube to actually keep track of why things were happening.

Call of Duty knows that these missions won't vibe with everyone. But they never call those conflicts political — because, of course, the position is that the game isn't political. They just use a big catch-all word for anyone who takes issue.

Controversy

Before the game's release, "Clean House" was a central pillar of the marketing campaign for *Modern Warfare*, and much of the marketing was centered around how much of a departure this story was for the series. Previous Call of Duties had been silly, explosive fare — this was *real*. They emphasized how many military experts they consulted with, how much care they took in recreating real-life military operations. And those real-life operations, like "Clean House", *might be controversial.* But that's what you needed to do if you wanted to accurately represent modern warfare.

But far from this actually being a departure for the series, Call of Duty has continuously marketed itself on its gritty **"controversies."**[10] *Modern Warfare 3* writers said that they "wanted to show, certainly in some particular cases, we wanted to show the effect of war...Civilians are part of that, innocent people are part of it, unfortunately." Accordingly, they vaporized a little girl.

Modern Warfare 2 needed to believably "sell why Russia would attack the U.S." and that's why you shot up an airport full of civilians.

Call of Duty drapes itself in surface-level controversy all the time, but the controversy always boils down to kinda the same thing: "Can you believe we're showing *this* in a video game?" The controversy never goes as deep as, say, acknowledging the time that the U.S. bombed a retreating army and all the civilians along with them. That honor is shifted to a fictional Russian operation.

And honestly, many of their Big Controversial levels feel like clickbait more than anything. "No Russian" is completely disconnected from the rest of the game, and even the original team really has **no consensus on what it *meant*.**[11] This family getting killed by a car bomb is, well it's just that. It is a momentary unpleasant surprise that fits quite well into a headline. As Campster (or "Errant Signal") pointed out, the "shoot a baby" scene in *Modern Warfare* is absolutely manufactured. The game doesn't even let you pull the trigger in a situation that would be friendly fire — hard as I try, I can't shoot Captain Price. But I can shoot this baby.

Call of Duty's marketed controversy is completely superficial. They show terrorist attacks and child death and deaden a player into a **shell-shocked**[12] acceptance of whatever actions are taken in retaliation.

Price congratulates Gaz for completing the "Clean House" mission

Finally,

What Does Call of Duty Actually Believe?

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's campaign is overflowing with torture.

Farah, the freedom fighter, is waterboarded at the hands of the Russian villain. In a, uhh, questionable choice, the torture is actually turned into a minigame — you turn your head to avoid the stream and the villain says things like, "Damn, you're good."

Oh, boy.

There's also a scene where you enter a mansion to find that the villain has been torturing men. Two of them resisted — one gave up everything.

There's ALSO a scene where Captain Price and Sergeant Garrick are interrogating a guy named "The Butcher." When he refuses to give up information, Price brings in The Butcher's wife and kid. He warns Garrick that, "You want the gloves off? They're off", a reference to Garrick's frustration early on with the lack of autonomy they were given in the treatment of terrorists. You, as Garrick, have the choice to leave or not. If you don't, Price gives you a revolver. The potential death of his wife and child finally prompts The Butcher to give up the needed information, and then you peace outta there with your new mission. You can kill him if you want — it doesn't affect the story either way.

This, in microcosm, is what Call of Duty believes. War is hard and often brutal, but there are a Few Good People who have the guts and the clarity of vision to do the right thing, whatever it takes. Those people are *always* those who actually have their boots on the ground, and never the ones who would let short-term morality stand in the way of long-term success.

13

Price has become the iconic character of the new-*Modern Warfare* series, front and center on the box art of both the first and third installments. This isn't his first appearance, of course; he was present in *COD 1* and *2*, the original three *Modern Warfare* games, and even popped up in *Black Ops*. But his increasingly prominent position in the series' marketing only serves to further align Call of Duty with Price's moral universe.

14

As several commenters on the video pointed out, Price *did* actually use chemical weapons against an enemy in 2011's *Modern Warfare 3*...in a torture scene, no less! An interesting pattern in Call of Duty's torture scenes is that torture is almost universally effective in extracting information from enemies, but virtually never effective when enemies are trying to get you or allies to talk. It functions as another moral judgment from the game; *if* you're susceptible to torture, you probably also deserve it. That would actually be an **interesting essay**¹...hmm...

I

Writing this annotation was what sparked the idea for my 2024 video, "Analyzing Every Torture Scene in Call of Duty."

This isn't *really* even an "ends justify the means" ideology. One of the curious things about *Modern Warfare's* storytelling is it's so jam-packed with missions, events, and explosions that I can't even really tell you what the intended "ends" were. It's more just, "The means are always fine if they're done by the right person."

I know the people who would make the right decisions. Captain Price would do the right thing, no matter the situation. He's cited by the writers as one of the heroes of the story! Even when he uses a man's wife and child to torture him, we understand that it's okay because he's one of the people who **Makes The Right Decisions.**¹³

Officer Alex would do the right thing, no matter the situation, and that's why the story doesn't condemn him when he leaves the CIA and joins the classified-as-enemy Urzik Militia. The story wants you to understand that the higher administrations just don't get the war like the ground-level troops do. It's why, in the story, Alex parts amicably with the whole squad, instead of being called a traitor or treasonous or whatever.

Farah, the freedom fighter, would do the right thing no matter the situation. She's strong, empathetic, and *extremely cooperative with the U.S. and British militaries.*

You know who can't be trusted to do the right thing? Her brother, Hadir. Because while they both want to free their country from internal terrorism and external occupation, Hadir is willing to do anything to accomplish those goals. Including, in one of the game's pivotal scenes, using chemical weapons against the invading Russian army. From this moment on, Hadir is completely sectioned off from the rest of the cast, talked about in the same lingo as an enemy combatant.

Hadir crossed a line, and the game's story never forgives him for it. And I mean, fair choice! Chemical warfare is a valid thing to call completely unacceptable. But Captain Price and Sergeant Garrick threatened to kill a man's wife and child in front of him, and both of those characters still come out painted as heroes.

No, I think the actual reason Hadir becomes a persona non grata is because of his refusal to be fully subservient to the American and British military that come in to "assist in liberation." I genuinely think that if there had come a point in the story where Price had decided to **use chemical weapons against the enemy,**¹⁴ the game would have framed it as "a tough choice, but we need people that can make those tough choices to protect our freedom." I mean for Christ's sake, in 2009's *Modern Warfare 2*, a different universe's Captain Price detonated a nuke directly above Washington, D.C. But we understood then, as we do now, that he's a Man That Can Make The Hard Decisions.

Modern Warfare's story, and virtually every other Call of Duty plotline, is one that valorizes the individual troop above civilians, ethics, and oversight. It's a story that tells us that we *can't understand* what's happening on the ground unless we're the people there, and as such, we shouldn't question the decisions of the soldiers who are.

It's a worldview where we base our moral judgments of actions completely on the pre-determined morality of the person carrying those actions out. And it's a perspective that has enormous ramifications in our unavoidably political reality.

Michael Behenna was an army ranger who stripped a suspected Al-Qaeda member naked during an unauthorized interrogation, then shot him twice. Mathew Golsteyn is an officer who murdered a civilian in Afghanistan, a civilian he claims was a bomb maker.

In his 2017 deployment, Special Ops Chief Edward Gallagher killed a 15-year-old captive with a hunting knife while the boy was receiving medical attention. He also spent days in a sniper perch, claiming to kill an average of three people a day for 80 days. Two separate SEAL snipers on the same team reported that they watched Gallagher shoot a girl in the stomach from his sniper nest — one of them guessed that she was about 12 years old. He was known to park an armored truck on a bridge and fire indiscriminately into neighborhoods. He was known to "fire rockets at houses for no apparent reason."

In 2014, Gallagher was detained at a traffic stop where he "allegedly tried to run over a Navy police officer."

In 2010, Gallagher "shot through an Afghan girl to hit the man carrying her, killing them both."

All three men have since received a presidential pardon. As Behenna's lawyer said, "We know we have a president who is very sympathetic to the very difficult situation that soldiers, sailors, and marines were put in during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars."

They, in the collective cultural imagination, are the Men Who Make The Right Decisions. Yes, their actions might seem immoral, bordering on inhuman, from our comfortable homes.

But as we're shown again and again, those inhuman actions aren't a fault, they're an imperative. These men are willing to do anything — *anything* — to come out on top. And ultimately, their willingness to set aside ethics and morals is the only way we can preserve ours.

This is what Call of Duty believes.[15]

LIFE IMITATES ART

While doing research for this essay, I was alarmed to find that many of Gallagher's alleged crimes lined up perfectly with moments from the game. I didn't have to search for perfect background footage when describing a Special Ops guy nearly running down an officer with his car or shooting through a woman to hit the man behind her — *Modern Warfare* contained exactly those scenes. The Call of Duty franchise loves to talk about how much its writers learn through interviews with active service members — are actions like Gallagher's alleged crimes so common they would come up as a matter of discussion? Or is this more a case of life imitating art? Gallagher joined the military in 1999, but virtually all young people enlisting today will be exposed to Call of Duty before receiving actual military training. In our rush to insist that "video games don't cause violence," I worry we ignore more subtle effects. How do video games affect the expectations of armed service members? How has Call of Duty impacted the image of military heroism? The U.S. Military acknowledges that video games are a valuable tool for recruitment — how can that be the end of the medium's influence?

15
I'm particularly proud of this mic drop of an ending because the previous few paragraphs *don't* contain an explicitly condemnatory moral judgement. Instead, I spent the conclusion speaking from Call of Duty's perspective, a decision that felt a little risky, given how drastically it differs from my own views. But leaving my own politics as (fairly obvious) subtext makes the argument of the essay stronger. The question we started with wasn't "does Call of Duty have bad politics," it was "does Call of Duty believe in anything?"

The ultimate conclusion of the essay shows that Call of Duty does, incontrovertibly, have a worldview, one I can illustrate with evidence from the text. Even if people agree with that worldview (and many do), I'm forcing them to acknowledge that there's no such thing as a war story without a perspective.

WHO IS CALL OF DUTY MADE FOR?

By Jamil Jan Kochai

JAMIL JAN KOCHAI

(he/him)

Jamil Jan Kochai is the author of *99 Nights in Logar* and *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories,* a winner of the 2023 Aspen Words Literary Prize and a finalist for the 2022 National Book Award. His short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Ploughshares, The O. Henry Prize Stories,* and *The Best American Short Stories.*

One of the silver linings of me tearing my ACL in 2023 was that it let me play *Modern Warfare* (2019) for the sake of this afterword. Post-op, bedridden, on medical leave, and legally prohibited from even answering work emails, I downloaded *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) on my brother's borrowed PlayStation 5 (God bless him), and for the first time in more than a decade, I completed a Call of Duty campaign.

I played the original *Modern Warfare* (2007) as a 14-year-old freshman in high school, and even then, I felt unnerved by the prospect of murdering wave after wave of Muslim NPCs. Fortunately, I was comforted by the distinct ambiguity that persisted throughout *Modern Warfare*'s campaign. While the game's weaponry and graphic images were awe-inspiring in their detail, the geopolitical dimensions were vague and very often confusing. The game seemed to evoke the contemporary "War on Terror"— it was safe to assume that the unnamed Middle Eastern setting was Iraq and that one of the enemy organizations was a fictional counterpart of Al-Qaeda — but no actual historical figures or insurgent organizations were present in the narrative.

As Jacob notes in his essay "Does Call of Duty Believe in Anything?", this strange juxtaposition between hyper-specificity and contextual ambiguity is not only present in the new *Modern Warfare* (2019) but is crucial to its developers' argument that the game is not political specifically because it's not about "the exact administrations and governments and events

"This is just play, I told myself, it's make-believe. Stop feeling guilty"

in our world today." Jacob has already convincingly argued why this is an absurd definition of what it means to be "political" — and I don't disagree — but I do have to admit: for the 14-year-old me that played *Modern Warfare* (2007), the fact that the game didn't *explicitly* engage with contemporary politics, the fact that I wasn't infiltrating Panjshir with the CIA, or interrogating Taliban fighters in Guantanamo, or hearing George Bush declare "Mission Accomplished" on the USS Abraham Lincoln, did make the game *feel* less political. The stakes were lowered. This is just play, I told myself, it's make-believe. Stop feeling guilty, I told myself, you're not shooting Muslims. You're not even shooting representations of Muslims. The ambiguity of the political context lulled me into a false sense of security and allowed me to complete the campaign.

And so, I think the question of audience here is important.

Who is *Modern Warfare* made for, and to what end?

In his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, the psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon delves into the concept of "collective catharsis". He writes: "In every society, in every collectivity, exists . . . an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released. This is the purpose of games in children's institutions, of psychodramas in group therapy, and, in a more general way, of illustrated magazines for children." Fanon goes on to suggest that Tarzan stories and comic book adventures of colonial heroes serve as a release for the collective aggression of white society. The magazines "are put together by white men for little white men." Furthermore, the cathartic violence envisioned in these narratives is almost necessarily directed at a colonized figure: an Indian, an African, or perhaps an Arab. Inevitably, in the process of imbibing these narratives, children (no matter what race they belong to) will identify with the

hero and subjectively adopt the position of the white explorer as opposed to the barbaric native, the object to be destroyed.

Like much of *Modern Warfare* (2019), the gameplay logic in its most famous level, "Clean House," is both confusing *and* disturbing. It's also gendered. The women in "Clean House" — or, I should specify, the *unarmed* women — are given exactly one chance at life. If they are unarmed, or if they don't seem to be reaching for a weapon, they are not to be killed. In fact, the very first (unarmed) woman you encounter is grabbed, muzzled, and restrained. Not murdered. But literally seconds later you peer into a room with two (seemingly) unarmed men and a woman, and while you can shoot both unarmed men (immediately, simultaneously, and in their heads), you are only able to shoot the woman after she has clearly reached for a machine gun. **The Arab**[1] men are terrorists by default. They are perishable. You can shoot them on sight, without hesitation. The women, on the other hand, must demonstrate an attempt to resist their home invaders (you) before you are allowed to murder them.

The gendered logic at play here is not far removed from actual military standards. An investigation by *The Intercept* found that any "military-age males" killed within the vicinity of a U.S. drone strike (even if they were not targeted) were automatically deemed guilty by association — oftentimes without any evidence that they were involved in militancy at all — thereby skewing civilian death statistics and bringing into question what exactly it means to be a "civilian." Of course, unarmed women and children (*undeniable* civilians) were also murdered far too often by U.S. military personnel. But I think it's worth noting that this idea of young Muslim men being deemed perishable, of them being deemed guilty by association, or physical proximity, has become standardized in U.S. military operations.

---

1 It's not explicitly clear that the enemies in "Clean House" are Arabs, but there are enough racial signifiers — skin color, clothing, and language — to insinuate that you are supposed to identify them as Arabs, or, at least, of stemming from the "Islamic world."

" You take life, give life, and take back the life you have given."

Eventually, when one of the women you encounter in "Clean House" is taken hostage by a man, you get to save her life by killing that man. But just a split second later, you discover that your victim — the apparent damsel in distress — was, all along, another combatant. She clearly reaches for a gun and, according to your rules of combat, you get to shoot her dead. Her murder becomes another achievement. Another form of "cathartic release."

In fact, the levels of cathartic violence at play in this one hostage-turned-combatant scene are pretty astounding. You, the British soldier, are able to save an Arab woman from an Arab man by executing that Arab man, *but then* you are able to kill that very same ungrateful Arab woman — without guilt! You take life, give life, and take back the life you have given. But there's more. History, too, rears its head. Invoked in this scene are the colonial tropes of the treacherous native woman (often referenced in Rudyard Kipling's work) and the savage Arab (just as prepared to slaughter his own as he is to resist the valiant soldier of empire). On top of everything else, "Clean House" eerily resembles the Osama Bin Laden assassination scene from *Zero Dark Thirty*. Filmed within a single year of Osama bin Laden's death — I remember being absolutely astounded that Katherine Bigelow managed to write, film, and produce such a big-budget, military action film in such a short amount of time — *Zero Dark Thirty* remains one of the most impressive pieces of military propaganda (and historical revisionism) ever made. At the climax of the film, there is a brief scene — almost identical to "Clean House" — where a woman reaches for a machine gun right before she is murdered by American Commandos. Of course, in reality, the only woman to be killed on the night of Bin Laden's assassination was unarmed when she was gunned down.

All of this occurs within seconds. All of this occurs within the context of "play." Unthinking, enjoyable, achievement-based "play." Whereas in *Zero Dark Thirty*, you merely observe the no-knock raid, you passively experience it, in *Modern Warfare*, you actively take part. You shoot "the hostage-turned-combatant". You make the split-second decision. You become judge *and* executioner. You feel the guilt — the weight of a life taken.

Or you don't.

As Jacob notes in his essay, there are underlying arguments being made in the gameplay mechanics of *Modern Warfare*, in the design of its levels and in the rhetoric of its characters. Though the developers would like to hide under a guise of "objectivity," of "perspectivelessness," their game is *absolutely* making a core thematic argument about the nature of modern warfare. Jacob says it best: "*Modern Warfare's* story...is one that valorizes the individual troop above civilians, ethics, and oversight. It's a story that tells us that we *can't understand* what's happening on the ground unless we're the people there, and as such, we shouldn't question the decisions of the soldiers who are. It's a worldview where we base our moral judgments of actions completely on the predetermined morality of the person carrying those actions out. And it's a perspective that has enormous ramifications in our unavoidably political reality."

And yet — beyond perspective — I think there is something else here that *Modern Warfare* is providing its audience.

A base desire it is serving.

A social function.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that "each type of society, of course, requires its own specific kind of catharsis." And just as comic books and children's tales were essential to the "collective catharsis" of twentieth-century Europeans — giving them a medium through which they could express their collective aggression, their violent fantasies, upon a colonized people — *Modern Warfare* has become a medium for the "collective catharsis" of contemporary Americans. The colonial fantasies of comic books and children's tales have been superseded by the more immersive neo-imperial fantasies

of the modern military video game. But while the act of reading a book or even watching a film can still be a passive experience, a first-person shooter provides you with a distinct element of agency. You are immersed in the battle. You become implicated in the destruction you are observing. You slowly creep from room to room, and you are not only *shown* how difficult it is to discern civilian from terrorist, but you, yourself, are forced to decide who is civilian and who is combatant, who is worthy of life and who is deserving death. In resisting you, your enemies relinquish their humanity. It's not a privilege to slaughter them. It's an obligation. You are tasked, for a few minutes, to become a god on the battlefield, and to experience, in that process, how difficult — but *satisfying* — godliness can be.

I remember in high school watching my friends line up during lunch to play *Modern Warfare 2* at a recruiting station. The soldiers had an Xbox and a flat-screen TV set up out of the back of a van. The line, mostly boys, stretched across the quad. Within a year, three of the four friends I used to play *Modern Warfare* with ended up joining the military. And sure, maybe those kids would have enrolled regardless of whether they encountered *Modern Warfare*, but these children's participation in the virtual violence ultimately prepped them — whether intentionally or not — for a career in actualized geopolitical violence.

At the end of his video essay "Does Call of Duty Believe in Anything?" Jacob runs down a list of civilian murders committed by US military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq, thereby demonstrating the real-world implications of *Modern Warfare's* implicit attempts to justify war crimes. I could not have imagined a more perfect (or horrifying) conclusion. Because this *is* the end point. Eventually, cathartic fantasies become reality. Virtual bullets turn to steel. And children raised by *Modern Warfare* may one day find it difficult to discern digital corpses from real ones.

THE DECADE-LONG QUEST FOR SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS' LAST SECRET

THE DECADE-LONG QUEST FOR SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS' LAST SECRET

19th essay published
August 8, 2019

Subscribers at time of video's release
2,245

Views at time of book's publication
6.2 million

a mystery which will never happen again,
a miracle which has never happened before–
and shining this our now must come to then

 E. E. Cummings, 1949
"now all the fingers of this tree..."

"THIS IS NOT A GENERAL DISCUSSION THREAD. IF YOU WISH TO CHAT, PLEASE CONFINE IT TO THE REST OF THE BOARDS. THANK YOU."

This is how forum user Ascadia started his post on the PlayStation forums, just one day after Christmas, 2007. The thread was called, **Quest for the Last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC [Shadow of the Colossus]**. He continued:

"Fumito Ueda is infamous for his attention to the most minute, intricate detail. Such appears to be the case with most of the Forbidden Lands; ruins lay toppled in the most likely angle, coastlines bear signs of erosion - even the dress on Mono's lifeless body is gently pushed back and forth by the wind. It is this same attention to detail, however, that would be the inattentive gamer's downfall."

In his 1000-word first post, Ascadia laid out what he called "the theory of intersecting points." In the opening of the 2005 PS2 game, a narration describes the origins of the game's world as "the resonance of intersecting points." Most assumed that this, like much of the game, was simply metaphorical. But Ascadia thought differently.

He identified four locations in the game's world, illustrated as glyphs on tiles in the central temple. He placed those locations on a map, and, like the opening voiceover instructed, found the resonance of intersecting points. This, he said, was the clue to the game's final secret.

The thread opened simply enough. The first response asks if it's possible to shine a light from Wander's sword directly onto the intersection of those points. A few later, a poster asks if it's possible to use a unique item for anything. The thread picks up steam, with more people theorizing about unorthodox elements of the game's geometry, and about five pages later, Ascadia summarizes what they've found, what they need to do, and what it all could mean in the context of this last great secret.

In his summary, his enthusiasm is obvious.

```
"I think we're really close to figuring this out, my friends.
Just a bit more..."
```

The thread, **Quest for the Last Big Secret / Mysteries of SotC,** is 562 pages long, or **5662 individual posts.**[1] The first post was in December of 2007 — the last was in March of 2016. The thread could fill a book. Indeed, one of the forum members claims to have had it printed and bound.

```
"I know it seems kind of silly, but has anyone tried doing all
the things they've previously tried on their 16th playthrough?"
```

Forum user Snoozy wondered this on January 21st, 2008, and the suggestion is both absurd and entirely in line with the hundreds of questions that were rolling into the thread. Snoozy's idea, like many of them, makes a sort of twisted sense; there were, after all, 16 colossi in the game. Sixteen was clearly an important number in the world of *Shadow of the Colossus*. And, the game's last, big secret, would obviously be well hidden. **So why not?**[2]

Games have hidden secrets obscenely well in the past. From the first Easter egg in *Adventure* to secret characters in *Mortal Kombat* [earn a Double Flawless Victory without blocking once and then perform a Fatality. In addition, the player must be at the Pit stage and a flying object must appear in the background, sailing in the

ASCADIA'S LEGACY

Talking about "Ascadia" has resulted in one of the most unexpected and moving interactions of my career. Shortly after the video's release, I received a comment by someone who identified themselves as Ascadia's cousin. The commenter, Dave, said that Ascadia's real name was Will. He said Will loved video games, volunteered at his church, and planned to travel to Japan to teach English. He also said that Will had unexpectedly died just the year before, at the age of 26. I later confirmed this with Will's mother, Susan, who both privately emailed me and publicly commented on the video.

Of course, I didn't know any of this while writing. Ascadia was merely a years-old name on a forum. But this knowledge has retroactively shifted how I view this video: not just as a general tribute to the devotion of a fan community, but also as a very specific tribute to the passion of one man. Will's theorizing on those forums now serves as a digital memorial to his life and spirit, a spirit so fierce it spawned 562 more pages of theorizing by hundreds of participants. Moreover, I can't help but think about Will in context of the themes of *Shadow of the Colossus* itself, a game consumed with the idea of loss and memory. At the time of writing, my video has over 6 million views on YouTube — I hope Will's family finds some comfort in how many people now hold Ascadia in their memory.

Will passed away on January 9, 2018, exactly one month before players found the last great secret of *Shadow of the Colossus*.

1

I'm fascinated by incredibly long posts and forum threads — there's even another referenced in this book, Peter Eliot's analysis of *ICO* (page 176). I love how public they are. Even 17 years after the **Quest for the Last Big Secret** post was started, I can go back and read the entire decade-long evolution of the conversation. They're vital archives of *how* games were discussed at specific points in time, records of not just topic but rhetoric. I think we've lost a lot of researchable history by moving all of these conversations to private DMs and Discord groups.

2

Any level of conspiracy theory inevitably incorporates some level of numerology. Whether it's QAnon or the secret seekers, fringe Christians predicting the date of the rapture or Taylor Swift fans predicting her next album release, the search for non-existent evidence pairs exceptionally well with significant-seeming numbers.

Catching a glimpse of the bridge while climbing to the secret garden

3

It's thrilling when a game manages to maintain some secrets in this age of hyper-competent internet sleuths. 2012's *FEZ* still contains some mysteries. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* had a secret room so well hidden that the developers ultimately just revealed it themselves. There are also arguably unachievable community goals, like "complete nuclear disarmament" in *Metal Gear Solid V*. Many other creators have documented these pursuits in their own video essays!

sky past the moon], the quest to find hidden content is almost as old as the medium itself. Especially in the 21st century, Easter eggs have been in an arms race against the hive-mind of the internet. Developers can hide content deeper and deeper within a game, but devoted fans with infinite time between them will almost always find it. ==**To *really* hide an Easter egg requires an almost imperceptible trail of breadcrumbs.**[3]==

Previous to *Shadow of the Colossus*, Fumito Ueda and his team made *ICO*, a melancholy game about a boy and a girl escaping from a castle together. *ICO* was understated, minimalist, cohesive. *ICO* also had a lightsaber. Did you know *ICO* has a lightsaber?? And it's not just that — to get the lightsaber, you need to take this ball and shoot some freakin hoops, and when you make it, the laser sword gets chucked through the window with all the grace of an empty soda can.

So there wasn't quite *evidence* for a last secret in *Colossus*, but there was a lot of evidence-adjacent material. There was a mythical interview that Ueda did in which he said there was still more to be found in the game — or at least, that's what people on the forum said. The thread was moving so fast in the early days that sources were just kinda left behind.

But more than anything, *Shadow of the Colossus* just *feels* like a game that harbors mysteries. Why build endless acres of brilliantly realized nature, then fill them with nothing? On a standard playthrough of the game, you'll barely see half of the Forbidden Lands. I, someone who's played this game more times than I can count, still find myself in places and think "I don't think I've ever been here before." With the immensity and detail of the world, it seems almost inevitable that there are things that have yet to be found. As Ascadia said, "It is this same attention to detail, however, that would be the inattentive gamer's downfall."

And! And! Secrets had *already* been found in the game, ones that only seemed to point to some deeper mystery. For instance, the secret garden. Now, the existence of the garden wasn't a secret — it features prominently in the game's final cutscene. But with enough stamina — an amount that could really only be achieved by multiple playthroughs of the game — **you could climb up the outside of the temple early, an agonizingly long climb, and reach this garden.**[4] In the garden, you'll come across the same fruits found in the game's wider world — but these fruits would permanently harm your vitality instead of helping it. From this garden, you could run across the bridge that spans a full half the world in length — after reaching the end, you could even see out into the lands beyond. But a powerful wind would always blow you back.

And even *within this secret*, there were further secrets. There was a demo of *Shadow of the Colossus,* and this demo also contained the garden. But in the demo, the garden was *different* and *weird*. In the main game, the garden holds nothing but pure nature. In the demo's garden, there was also a headless body.

These discoveries were all known about before Ascadia's thread, but you can see the logic in thinking there must be more. Why hide this garden so completely if there was nothing to "do" there? Why allow us to get so tantalizingly close to leaving the Forbidden Lands? **Why the hell did the demo have a headless body?**[5]

Furthermore, there were the extra items from the game's time attack mode. After beating the game once, players could attempt to slay each colossus under a strict deadline. Every pair of colossi defeated, the game would award a new item. Some of these were fairly straightforward — a mask that did more damage, or a map that showed the locations of all the game's fruit. Others were significantly more unusual. Bomb arrows. A harpoon. A sword that reflected the sun, even in the dark. A parachute, that, if used correctly, could give a player a much further jump than normal. Maybe most noteworthy of all was the "Queen's Sword," a clear reference to *ICO* and that game's arch-villain. These items all held gameplay benefits, sure. But for players who had proven themselves able to slay every colossus in record time, the ability to kill slightly more efficiently seemed...anticlimactic. There had to be something more, right?

With all this as wind at their backs, a growing number of players scoured the minutiae of *Colossus's* world. Although Ascadia had named the thread, it took a couple more months for someone — a forumite named Midsize D — to find a true name for themselves.

"Keep on scouring the land, I have full faith in you, the secret seekers."

Of all the ideas thrown out, Ascadia's original theory of intersecting points still feels the most solid. In the secret garden — as well as the outside of the temple and other stonework in the game — he identified four glyphs that corresponded

4

When I first played through the game on PS2, I did actually climb all the way to the secret garden (through an exploit that allowed me to jump diagonally without using much stamina). Getting to the top and running for seven minutes across the entirety of the bridge is a formative gaming memory. I remember looking down and realizing that a tiny moving speck in the desert below was actually Agro the horse, galloping to keep up with me. I was so touched I almost cried.

5

In the years since I published this essay, commenters have continued to suggest possible solutions to the completely-disproved Last Great Secret. "Did they try-" yes, they did. They tried everything anyone could possibly think of. I'm never annoyed to get these comments though. I love that, for them, the mystery is still alive.

These would-be treasure maps were even more compelling on the PS2, with its 512x448 resolution. There was more room for mystery when the game itself was this low-definition — the audience had to imagine the missing detail of every texture, and Ascadia could imagine these textures corresponding to other points on the map. The original release of *Shadow of the Colossus* also ran at like 17 frames per second. This wasn't part of anyone's secret theory, but it always made me feel like the PS2 was straining to contain the game's world within it. Technical limitations, recontextualized to be part of the experience!

7

I wrote this essay in 2019. The phrase "bricked up" went viral in 2020, largely off the back of an interview with rapper Jack Harlow in which he refers to being "bricked up" (erect) looking at Shego, a character from the animated TV show *Kim Possible*. I want this timeline to be VERY CLEAR, because my use of this phrase PREDATED IT MEANING "HAVING A BONER."

to places in the world. Sort of. **Each one is heavily abstracted, and shown from directly above.**[6] But his illustrations are convincing. This one could be the two tall spires that Wander walks between when first entering the Forbidden Lands. This one shows the wall of columns in the 15th colossus's arena. When taken together, the glyphs form a perfect cross — and the intersection of the cross lies directly over the sunken lakebed in which you fight Celosia, the game's 11th boss.

Celosia is unique for a number of reasons. It's by far the smallest colossus you've fought so far. The fight takes place at the bottom of a deep pit, the only one of its kind in the game. To defeat it, you have to use a blazing torch — the only time in the game you use a temporary item like this. Of course, none of this was as enthralling as the massive door in the back of the arena — **bricked up**[7] and endlessly curious.

It's a genuinely compelling theory, based on just enough evidence to seem like an intentional treasure map. Game design is typically utilitarian, by necessity. Making a game is *hard* and *expensive*. You don't build a giant stone door for no reason, right?

But just as soon as Ascadia posted his theory, the thread was inundated by other questions and theories, many of which seemed equally valid! What were those rings in the desert, and why were they positioned in such a specific way? That beach, the one that looks like it's from *ICO* — that has to be related somehow. As a matter of fact, is that the castle from *ICO* in the distance, as seen from the top of the bridge? And the hole that Dormin speaks through — why can't that be seen from the secret garden?

These unanswered questions form one of the pillars of *Shadow of the Colossus'* design. You are meant to feel like a stranger in a strange land, and the game's sparse dialogue provides character motivations rather than a comprehensive backstory. And because of how little text there is, *everything* could be something. A decade ago, I remember reading a 25,000-word plot and theory analysis on GameFAQs, one that sought to find answers for questions like, "Why is Wander's horse so big?" and "Does Mono become the queen in *ICO*?"

Of course, there's virtually no evidence to base anything on, but these conversations led to some legitimately moving theories. Wander's horse *is* too big for him! But what if their mismatch is because they've been bonded since birth, growing and learning together and forming a connection far more important than any size discrepancy? There's no evidence to discredit this reading and it makes many of the game's climactic beats hit even harder.

But there's no getting around it. The secret seekers didn't want interesting headcanon — they wanted substance. They wanted something huge. They wanted...well, they wanted a colossus. It's well documented that Fumito Ueda originally planned 48 giants to battle in the game, before cutting it down to 24 — and then 16. Was it *that* inconceivable that *Shadow of the Colossus* could contain one more for the most dedicated of players?

Unsuccessfully attempting to use a hawk to fly to a secret location

Several months in, the theories were getting wilder. Flight became an obsession — for some, by careful use of the parachute item, for others, by grabbing onto the feet of a bird and hoping. Players obsessed with the desert rings noticed that the sword stuck in the sand the same way it stuck in a colossus. Was there some hidden button to hit among the dunes? Disputes between seekers occasionally broke out on the forum. Some explored higher and farther than ever by exploiting glitches in the game's physics system, while others argued that Ueda would never have required a glitch to find the last great secret. But overall, attitudes remained remarkably positive, like a doomsday cult that had their faith redoubled with every faulty prediction.

The thread looked to any source for legitimacy. One user, Chango_Martinez[8] noted that they had been awarded "post of the week" on the PlayStation forums. "That's got to be some kind of hint from Sony, right?"

Perhaps the most esoteric rabbit hole the secret seekers fell down was that of literary allusion, and this was a topic of discussion since the very beginning of the thread. Ascadia's original post features this impressive gauntlet of biblical and gamic connections:[9]

"In the bible, in Job 41, a creature called the 'Leviathan' is described. Some translations say 'whale', although the text clearly calls it a 'sea serpent'. So, whale, leviathan, and serpent are all used interchangeably. This is relevant because defeating a certain number of colossi on Hard Time Attack unlocks the 'Harpoon of Thunder'. This is important because when Dormin is describing Hydrus, he also says, '...a ripple of thunder lurks underwater.' The Harpoon's namesake could very well be a direct reference to Hydrus. It is also apparent that Hydrus is meant to resemble a Sea Serpent…"

8
Chango_Martinez actually got in touch with me after the release of this essay. He still has the same username, though has sadly lost his Crash Bandicoot profile picture.

9
These attempts to uncover the secret through literary allusion are almost certainly my favorite part of the original thread. They're still rooted in a conspiracy theory mindset…but a harmless version of it, reminiscent of Nicolas Cage in *National Treasure* or something. What the secret seekers truly discovered weren't clues to the secret; instead, their quest caused them to unwittingly trace the commonalities in how we tell stories, a web of connections drawn from hundreds and thousands of years of snowballing artistic influence.
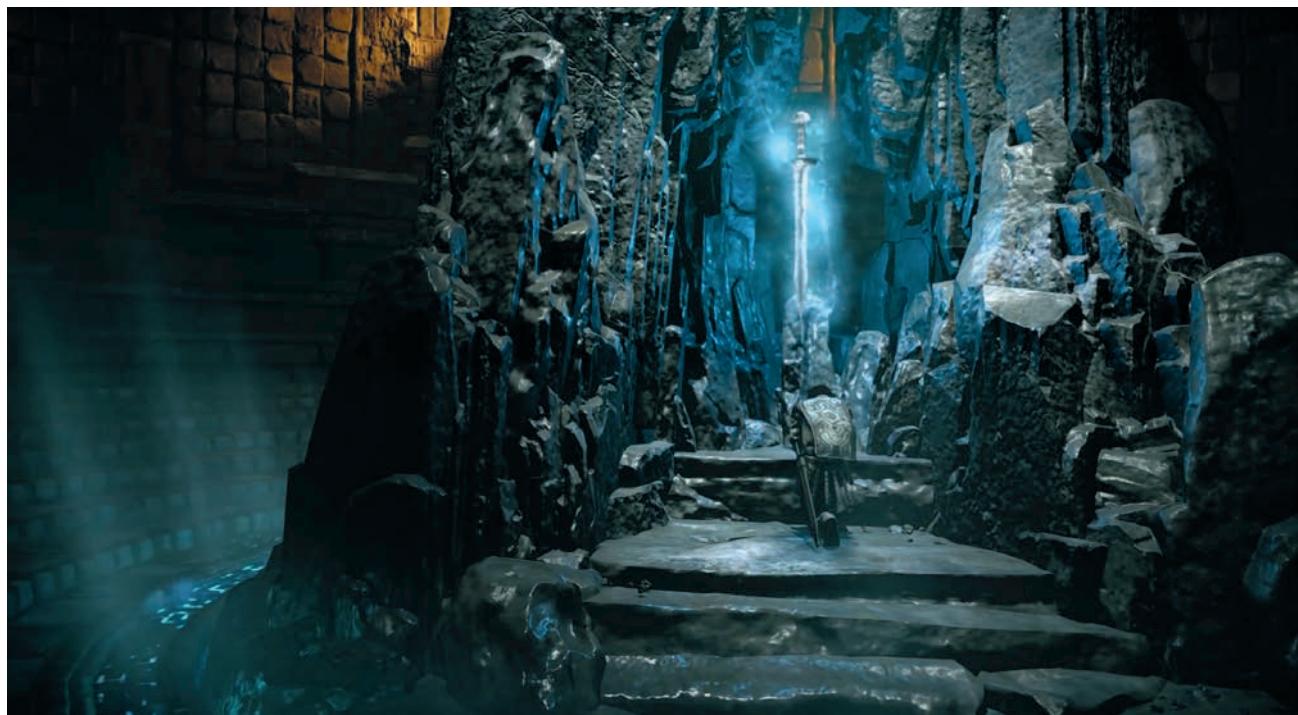
The new secret room in 2018's remake

10

It's not impossible that some of these connections were intentional. I have no doubt Ueda is a scholar of the mythology of many different cultures. But does that mean they have to point to a great secret? Not necessarily. Maybe they were meaningful literary allusions! On the other hand, it could be like the Christian iconography in the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, in which the assistant director stated **"there is no actual Christian meaning to the show, we just thought the visual symbols of Christianity looked cool."**

11

I had friends record dramatic readings of these forum messages for the video, and some of those friends have gone on to also become wonderful professional colleagues. One of the earlier messages was read by Tayls, my exceptional community manager. Crockadog was voiced by my thumbnail artist, James Docherty (page 90). In fact, the thumbnail he designed for this video was the first he created for someone other than himself. He's gone on to create thumbnails for half the essayists on YouTube.

As the thread's pages escalated into the double, then triple digits, the number of possible connections to other myths and stories escalated as well. One user asked if they could scald Hydrus with the burning stick, just as Hercules defeated the Hydra. Another, SuperYorda, found inspiration in the stories of giants in Cornwall by **19th-century English writer Robert Hunt.**[10] In one such story, the key to a giant's castle was hidden at the end of a narrow path only accessible at low tide. A narrow path? Low tide? Sounds like the sunken lakebed you fight Celosia in!

There was undeniably some level of animosity towards the naysayers. Every couple of pages, someone would pop up in the thread to say, "Hey, I love this game as much as you do, but you're wasting your time here. There's nothing left."

And these sentiments would be met with strong rebukes that no, there *was* something, in fact there was a *lot of evidence* that there was something, and if they weren't there to help, they could *get out*. My favorite one of these interactions is startling self-aware. User JokazWild2 wrote:

"After 3 years, you would think someone would have found it by now. What makes you all think this is even real, that there really is a big secret??? I guess I just need some convincing. I see all these theories, but has anyone actually found anything more than a theory???"

And almost immediately, **Crockadog**[11] responds.

"If you aren't a believer, don't come to the thread. It's the same thing with a church. If you don't believe in God, don't come. No one wants you here if you are just going to say 'PROOF!! PROOF!! I WANT PROOF!!!' Just leave the ones who want to search

for the secret search, whether or not it exists or not does not matter. They have something to believe in, and that is all that they need. If you think the secret seekers are wasting their time, that is nice for you. **Good bye."**[12]

"They have something to believe in, and that is all that they need."

What an unbelievably self-aware thing to say, right? The secret seekers were still going, a hundred-plus pages in, with no new evidence. But they believed. Is it going too far to say that these seekers embodied the same mentality as Wander, the protagonist of *Colossus*? Refusing to take the obvious answer, digging deeper and deeper into the unknown to find a truth they demanded exist?

On August 28th, 2008, a new user named Pikol appeared on the thread, with an enigmatic first post. A link to a YouTube video on his own account, saying, "watch this guys, ull find it quite interesting."

The YouTube channel has since been terminated, but it's obvious from the forum's reaction that Pikol's discoveries were different than the thousands of previous posts. He was standing in impossible locations, clipping through impenetrable walls, throwing himself all over the map. Pikol was emulating.

And for the church of the secret seekers, Pikol was at once an unbelievable gift and a crisis of faith. Because for the first time, they had someone who could actually pull back the curtain. The thread had been chipping away for months and months at the most obstinate pieces of the game's geometry. And now Pikol, like a god, could walk through solid rock and prove — definitively — that there was nothing.

We have to, finally, face the music. There is no 17th colossus. There's nothing behind the door in Celosia's arena, no way to ride a hawk to the top of the shrine of worship. The mythical interview with Ueda never materialized. But does that mean there's no last great secret? Well here's the thing. Did Pikol kill the god of the secret seekers cult? Kinda, yeah. BUT what he offered instead was almost as good — boundless technical information about the world of *Shadow of the Colossus*. **Pikol was quickly joined by the still-active Nomad Colossus,**[13] and together they comprehensively mapped the Forbidden Lands in a way that had never been done before.

There was disappointment, sure. It turns out that the theory of intersecting points was a bust, and the Dormin hole doesn't hide much of anything. But there's *amazing* stuff too. Far outside the bounds of the game, Pikol found an enormous dam, beautifully constructed and entirely unused. Nomad went on to discover mountain ranges, plateaus, great glitchy plains, and expanses of ocean. **Things never before seen.**[14]

And the beautiful thing about that original forum thread is it *kept going*. For hundreds of pages, it kept going. Some still hoped for that last great secret, but most everyone was really in it for the knowledge now, to put together every

12

Crockadog's full message also included this addendum: **"Oh, and I want to point out that I did not ask if you were a Christian, and nor do I give a damn. Also, I am not Christian, so don't bother saying anything to that effect."** This was the era of the internet where declaring one's indifference (if not outright antagonism) to religion was borderline required.

13

Most of Pikol's videos can now be found reuploaded on Nomad Colossus' channel. Nomad's rate of discovery and upload is almost unbelievable — he's uploaded four new videos documenting strange or interesting *Shadow of the Colossus* phenomena *in the past month*. There is something near-religious about his commitment to the game, repeatedly going over the same text for 20 years and still finding new perspectives.

14

There is a sort of liminal magic to out-of-bounds areas, an uncanniness that many games writers have discussed. For instance, the short documentary "The Grannies," directed by Marie Foulston, which records a collection of Australian artists exploring the areas beyond the limits of *Red Dead Redemption 2's* map. It's fascinating to see extreme technical artistry run into the unintended borders of programmed world design. In *Colossus'* case, these out-of-bounds areas also feel a bit like x-raying the Mona Lisa and finding previous versions of the same painting below it — evidence of the artist's process hidden within the art itself.

Bluepoint also created a graphically lavish remake of FromSoftware's *Demon's Souls*, and hid another secret behind an equally extensive puzzle. It took slightly longer for the community to solve — seven days, where *Colossus'* secret was found in three. Although the original *Demon's Souls* didn't have the same type of secret-seeking community, I do think these puzzles are a particularly fun style of Easter egg in otherwise slavish remakes.

16

Why *79* steps to enlightenment in particular? The question doesn't have a definitive answer — in fact, its ambiguity motivated a return to the numerology of the original thread. Some theorize that the number is related to the fact that Nomad Colossus climbed the game's shrine of worship in his 79th video. Others say it's because the shrine's coordinates on the map grid (F4) translate to 79 when put through a hex translator. OTHERS say it's because 7+9=16, and there are 16 colossi. I asked Nomad Colossus and he said as far as he knows, the number was basically random...*or is that just what he WANTS us to think?*

last piece of data possible on this piece of art they all loved so much. *Shadow of the Colossus* kept on giving, far after its creators ever expected it to.

I adore the dedication. I especially love all those attempts to connect it to the Bible, to Hercules, to Robert Hunt. Because, although they didn't ultimately result in a 17th colossus, *that's literary analysis, baby!* That's basically all I do on this channel! People pay schools thousands of dollars to get classes in making those kind of connections, and here are forum users with a Crash Bandicoot icon learning how to do it with a PS2 game!

Nomad Colossus, probably most dedicated of anyone, has unearthed an incredible wealth of information on the game. He's found the probable locations of all 24 originally planned colossi. He's investigated demo discs, unearthed unused items. His plotting of the geography is so complete that the PS4 remake of the game even used his videos for reference footage. And when that game came out, Bluepoint, the team that made it, actually thanked him in the credits.

```
Special Thanks:
Nomad Colossus
```

...and the 79 Steps to Enlightenment?[15]

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, look, we've gone down this road before, that last search was fun for sure but let's not go jumping to conclusions about random numbers. We've been burned before. But like...if they were...then...

OKAY FUCK IT WHAT ARE THE 79 STEPS?[16]

Hidden around the Forbidden Lands, newly realized in pristine current-gen graphics, are tiny gold sparks, fireflies maybe, or elusive coins. Get near enough to one, and you'll get a subtle windchime sound. Get closer, and you can collect it. Not marked on the map, not referenced in any game text, but they're there. Finding even one feels like a freak accident...

Nomad Colossus. And the 79 steps to enlightenment.

For one final time, scour the Forbidden Lands. Chart every cave, scale every mountain. Every toppled tree matters, every twist of the coast.

ON SUCCESS

More than any other video, this one marked a turning point for my channel. Prior to this, my most successful videos ended around 8k views — this one got 517k views in a single day. It is, still, the most explosive launch I've ever had on my channel. The views, along with the tens of thousands of new subscribers that came with them, instantly catapulted my channel from "fun hobby" to "maybe I should be thinking about this as a job." I didn't even have a Patreon set up yet!

The new viewers also flooded into my older videos, quickly giving essays like "Who's Afraid of Modern Art" and "The Quiet Sadness of Mario Galaxy" hundreds of thousands of new views. It was dizzying, and not in a totally positive way — the human brain is not built to receive the level of attention that I suddenly found myself receiving. I had trouble sleeping for weeks, kept awake by thoughts of the sheer number of eyes that were now judging what I had made.

Why this video? I have no real answers except the nebulous YouTube "algorithm." I do think the essay's title poses a pretty irresistible question, and the promise of a payoff at the end probably kept viewers watching for longer than normal. The narrative has an actual emotional arc, which sets it apart from the typical YouTube video on this sort of topic. But is it *better* than any previous video I had made? Certainly not. I'm just appreciative I didn't attempt to appease "the algorithm" by pivoting entirely into videos about searching for secrets or something. Success on these platforms is never guaranteed — to stay in it and stay sane, you have to just make what you love.

This was it. Thirteen years later. Five hundred sixty pages of forum threads, every square foot of this beautiful barren landscape examined. And at the end of it all, 79 steps to enlightenment, to open this never-opened door, to descend into this untouched chamber below the shrine of worship.

Take a minute to reflect on the fact that this is *exactly* what the secret seekers wanted. Just a little more. Just one final mystery to solve. Take a minute more to think about Ascadia, Pikol, Nomad Colossus, all the hundreds of others whose commitment and hopes and passions made this possible. This chamber is a manifestation of that continued will. Here is a community that was so willing to just *believe* that more than a decade on, a group of developers took that energy and harnessed it into something real.

And what is the Last Great Secret? It's a hidden chamber, with a throne and a **sword.**[17] It's not that much.

But also, it's **everything**.

THE TALE OF SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

By Chris Plante

The similarities between *Moby Dick* and *Shadow of the Colossus* aren't subtle. The title *"Shadow of the Colossus"* could just as well be an alternate title for Herman Melville's masterpiece. After all, what precisely does Ahab live in?

In both texts, we watch men journey through empty landscapes to slay their Leviathan. In starting their quest, they gain purpose. And in ending their quest, they hope to be made whole — only to find, in the resolution, the same conclusion that awaits everything a human is, knows, and touches.

The secret seekers of Jacob's essay aren't so different from Ahab and Wander. They too craved the sense of purpose an impossible goal provides — a perpetual-motion machine of self-justification. They too hoped — no, believed! — some great reward awaited them, even as weeks became months. Months became years. And a forum post thread became a conspiracy.

I won't make the same mistake; I leave that to you. I offer the one thing none of these texts could. Would. Should. *An answer.*

Of course, it can't be that simple. You must *find* the answer — an answer that is necessarily incomplete. The text is insufficient without its accompanying art. And some patterns may culminate in the penultimate step because not every journey will reach its intended destination.

With that, I send you on your way with a word from Ahab: "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing."

CHRIS PLANTE

(he/him)

Chris Plante is an editor living in Southern California. He's the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Polygon*, a co-host of the long-running video game podcast *The Besties*, and the creator of NYU's Intro to Games Journalism course. Herman Melville wrote most of his section in this book.

1.

2. – – – – – – – – – –
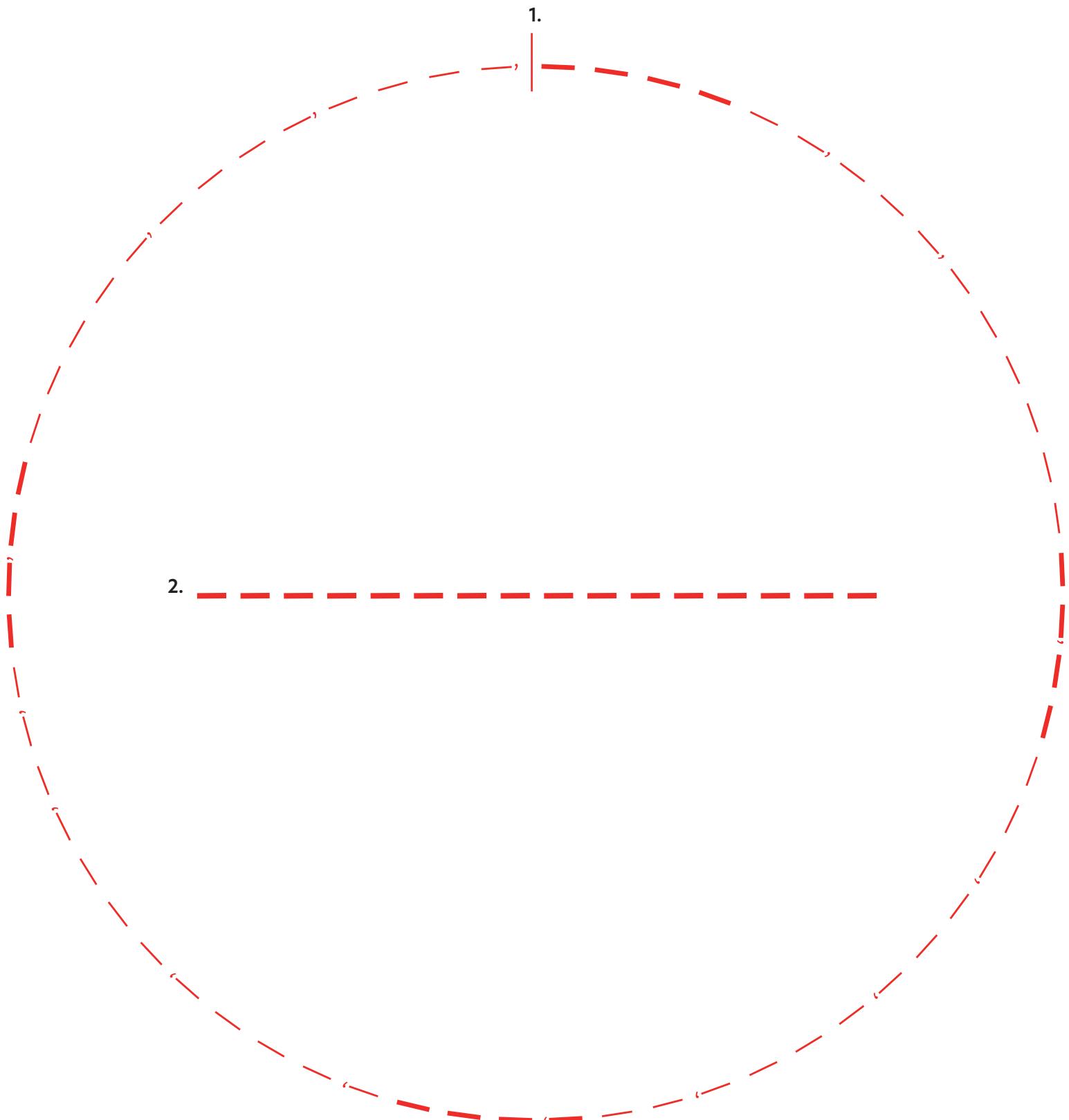
Foolish Humans Hope
Gods
3. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ **Gods** _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

"Oh! Ahab," cried Starbuck, "not too late is it, even now, the third day, to **desist**. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!"

Setting sail to the rising wind, the lonely boat was swiftly impelled to leeward, by both oars **and** canvas. And at last when Ahab was sliding by the vessel, so near as plainly to distinguish Starbuck's face as he leaned over the rail, he hailed him to turn the vessel about, and follow him, not too swiftly, at a judicious interval. Glancing upwards, he saw Tashtego, Queequeg, and Daggoo, eagerly mounting to the three mast-heads; while the oarsmen were rocking in the two staved boats which had but just been hoisted to the side, and were busily at work in repairing them. One after the other, through the port-holes, as he sped, he also caught flying glimpses of Stubb and Flask, busying themselves on deck among bundles of new irons and lances. As he saw all this; as he heard the hammers in the broken boats; far other hammers seemed driving a nail into his heart. But he rallied. And now marking that the vane or flag was gone from the main-mast-head, he shouted to Tashtego, who had just gained that perch, to descend again for another flag, and a hammer and nails, and so nail it to the mast.

Whether fagged by the three days' running chase, and the resistance to his swimming in the knotted hamper he bore; or whether it was some latent deceitfulness and malice in him: whichever was true, the White Whale's way now began to abate, as it seemed, from the boat so rapidly nearing him once more; though indeed the whale's last start had not been so long a one as before. And still as Ahab glided over the waves the unpitying sharks accompanied him; and so pertinaciously stuck to the boat; and so continually bit at the plying oars, that the blades became jagged and crunched, and left small splinters in the sea, at almost every dip.

"Heed them not! those teeth but give new rowlocks to your oars. Pull on! 'tis the better rest, the shark's jaw than the yielding water."

"But at every bite, sir, the thin blades grow smaller and smaller!"

"They will last long enough! pull on!—But who can tell"—he muttered—"whether these sharks swim to feast on the whale or on Ahab?—But pull on! Aye, all alive, now—we near him. The helm! take the helm! let me pass,"—and so saying two of the oarsmen helped him forward to the bows of the still flying boat.

At length as the craft was cast to one side, and ran ranging along with the White Whale's flank, he seemed strangely oblivious of its advance—as the whale sometimes will—and Ahab was fairly within the smoky mountain mist, which, thrown off from the whale's spout, curled round his great,

Monadnock hump; he was even thus close to him; when, with body arched back, and both arms lengthwise high-lifted to the poise, he darted his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale. As both steel and curse sank to the socket, as if sucked into a morass, Moby Dick sideways writhed; spasmodically rolled his nigh flank against the bow, and, without staving a hole in it, so suddenly canted the boat over, that had it not been for the elevated part of the gunwale to which he then clung, Ahab would once more have been tossed into the sea. As it was, three of the oarsmen—who foreknew not the precise instant of the dart, and were therefore unprepared for its effects—these were flung out; but so fell, that, in an instant two of them clutched the gunwale again, and rising to its level on a combing wave, hurled themselves bodily inboard again; the third man helplessly dropping astern, but still afloat and swimming.

Almost simultaneously, with a mighty volition of ungraduated, instantaneous swiftness, the White Whale darted through the weltering sea. But when Ahab cried out to the steersman to take new turns with the line, and hold it so; and commanded the crew to turn round on their seats, and tow the boat up to the mark; the moment the treacherous line felt that double strain and tug, it snapped in the empty air!

"What breaks in me? Some sinew cracks!—'tis whole again; oars! oars! Burst in upon him!"

Hearing the tremendous rush of the sea-crashing boat, the whale wheeled round to present his blank forehead at bay; but in that evolution, catching sight of the nearing black hull of the ship; seemingly seeing in it the source of all his persecutions; bethinking it—it may be—a larger and nobler foe; of a sudden, he bore down upon its advancing prow, smiting his jaws amid fiery showers of foam.

Ahab staggered; his hand smote his forehead. "I grow blind; hands! stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way. Is't night?"

"The whale! The ship!" cried the cringing oarsmen.

"Oars! oars! Slope downwards to thy depths, O sea, that ere it be for ever too late, Ahab may slide this last, last time upon his mark! I see: the ship! the ship! Dash on, my men! Will ye not save my ship?"

But as the oarsmen violently forced their boat through the sledge-hammering seas, the before whale-smitten bow-ends of two planks burst through, and in an instant almost, the temporarily disabled boat lay nearly level with the waves; its half-wading, splashing crew, trying hard to stop the gap and bale out the pouring water.

Meantime, for that one beholding instant, Tashtego's mast-head hammer remained suspended in his hand; and the red flag, half-wrapping him as with a plaid, then streamed itself straight out from him, as his own forward-flowing heart; while Starbuck and Stubb, standing upon the bowsprit beneath, caught sight of the down-coming monster just as soon as he.

"The whale, the whale! Up helm, up helm! Oh, all ye sweet powers of air, now hug me close! Let not Starbuck die, if die he must, in a woman's fainting fit. Up helm, I say—ye fools, the jaw! the jaw! Is this the end of all my bursting prayers? all my life-long fidelities? Oh, Ahab, Ahab, lo, thy work. Steady! helmsman, steady. Nay, nay! Up helm again! He turns to meet us! Oh, his unappeasable brow drives on towards one, whose duty tells him he cannot depart. My God, stand by me now!"

"Stand not by me, but stand under me, whoever you are that will now help Stubb; for Stubb, too, sticks here. I grin at thee, thou grinning whale! Who ever helped Stubb, or kept Stubb awake, but Stubb's own unwinking eye? And now poor Stubb goes to bed upon a mattrass that is all too soft; would it were stuffed with brushwood! I grin at thee, thou grinning whale! Look ye, sun, moon, and stars! I call ye assassins of as good a fellow as ever spouted up his ghost. For all that, I would yet ring glasses with ye, would ye but hand the cup! Oh, oh! oh, oh! thou grinning whale, but there'll be plenty of gulping soon! Why fly ye not, O Ahab! For me, off shoes and jacket to it; let Stubb die in his drawers! A most mouldy and over salted death, though;—cherries! cherries! cherries! Oh, Flask, for one red cherry ere we die!"

"Cherries? I only wish that we were where they grow. Oh, Stubb, I hope my poor mother's drawn my part-pay ere this; if not, few coppers will now come to her, for the voyage is up."

From the ship's bows, nearly all the seamen now hung inactive; hammers, bits of plank, lances, and harpoons, mechanically retained in their hands, just as they had darted from their various employments; all their enchanted eyes intent upon the whale, which from side to side strangely vibrating his predestinating head, sent a broad band of overspreading semicircular foam before him as he rushed. Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled. Some fell flat upon their faces. Like dislodged trucks, the heads of the harpooneers aloft shook on their bull-like necks. Through the breach, they heard the waters pour, as mountain torrents down a flume.

"The ship! The hearse!—the second hearse!" cried Ahab from the boat; "its wood could only be American!"

Diving beneath the settling ship, the whale ran quivering along its keel; but turning under water, swiftly shot to the surface again, far off the other bow, but within a few yards of Ahab's boat, where, for a time, he lay quiescent.

"I turn my body from the sun. What ho, Tashtego! let me hear thy hammer. Oh! ye three unsurrendered spires of mine; thou uncracked keel; and only god-bullied hull; thou firm deck, and haughty helm, and Pole-pointed prow,—death-glorious ship! must ye then perish, and without me? Am I cut off from the last fond pride of meanest shipwrecked captains? Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear!"

The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the grooves;—ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone. Next instant, the heavy eye-splice in the rope's final end flew out of the stark-empty tub, knocked down an oarsman, and smiting the sea, disappeared in its depths.

For an instant, the tranced boat's crew stood still; then turned. "The ship? Great God, where is the ship?" Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooneers still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight.

But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, leaving a few inches of the erect spar yet visible, together with long streaming yards of the flag, which calmly undulated, with ironical coincidings, over the destroying billows they almost touched;—at that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar...

GETTING UNDER THE COVERS

By James Docherty

Although we're told to never judge a book by its cover, it's undeniable that great artwork can significantly pique our interest. This was true for movie theaters and the shelves of Blockbuster Video, and it remains true today on streaming platforms and YouTube. Technology may have advanced, but the most successful channels and videos still use eye-catching artwork to make a strong first impression. You might wonder how these big name creators have the bandwidth to create promotional art while simultaneously crafting engaging videos.

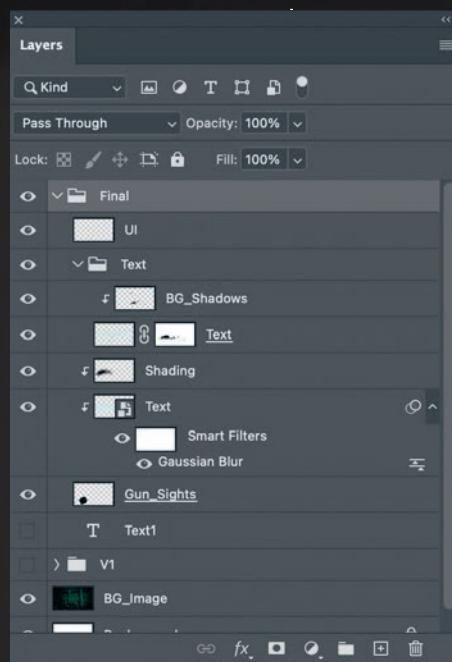In a lot of cases, they don't.

The best creatives know where to focus their talents and rely on others to support them in different areas. This is where professionals like myself come in. Over the past few years, I've helped channels of all sizes reach wider audiences by creating high-quality and effective thumbnails for their videos. That journey began with Jacob back in 2019 with his video "The Decade-Long Quest For Shadow of the Colossus' Last Secret."
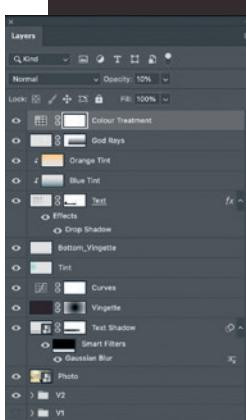
Since then, I've been responsible for almost every thumbnail accompanying his videos and numerous graphic design elements that enhance his already high-quality work. It's not often that one gets to see the direct impact of their work on the success of others — it's been fascinating to observe how my collaboration with Jacob has influenced YouTube's thumbnail meta,

creating a compelling alternative to flashy arrows and giant faces.

What's funny is that these elements came about from what I cherish most about our working relationship: an openness to ideas. We strive to find the sweet spot between his vision and mine, creating something that makes us both want to click on a video. Despite our successes, neither of us considers ourselves static experts, and this willingness to adapt keeps our collaboration fresh and dynamic. While I'm proud of what we've accomplished so far, I'm even more excited about what we're going to create next.

Within this centerfold lies every piece of work we've created since that inaugural video (at time of publication, at least), along with the stories behind images for the pivotal essays explored in this book. In a playful twist, we're presenting the content before inviting you to judge our covers.

A COLOSSAL PROJECT

Jacob and I met each other through a video essayist forum. He actually first asked for some motion graphics for the *Shadow of the Colossus* video — after being impressed with my work, he proposed I take a look at the thumbnail. *Colossus* features stunning vistas and massive stone structures that naturally invite curiosity, and I aimed to recapture that look by compositing large text into an epic environment. After testing several ideas, we settled on this location from *Colossus* for its expansive space and the bridge's shape that naturally funnelled the viewer's eye toward the text and the video's concept.

Overlapping text in a big environment has since become known as the "Jacob style," which many creators have emulated though often without understanding its original intent. We frequently use this approach in a thumbnail to highlight the immense scale of environments, though only when that idea aligns with a video's theme.

While I'm proud of the final composition, I've grown as an artist and see small adjustments that could enhance the concept: vignetting to draw the eye, extra colour correction, and perhaps integrating an element of Colossus' big secret to tease what's to come.

NOTHING TO FEAR

Creating a thumbnail often demands meticulous composition, merging various elements to craft entirely new visuals. However, the effort pays off, particularly when future videos directly reference that hard work. "Fear of Cold" exemplifies this approach, where much of the groundwork was laid in the previous "Fear of Depths" video, allowing us to create continuity and further ratify the channel's identity. This also allowed Jacob's chosen artwork for Cold to speak for itself. The only adjustments needed were resizing the image to better fit the thumbnail format.

HOW TO MAKE A THUMBNAIL

There isn't a formula for the perfect thumbnail; each must be unique to match a video's style or tone. However, there are a few guiding principles.
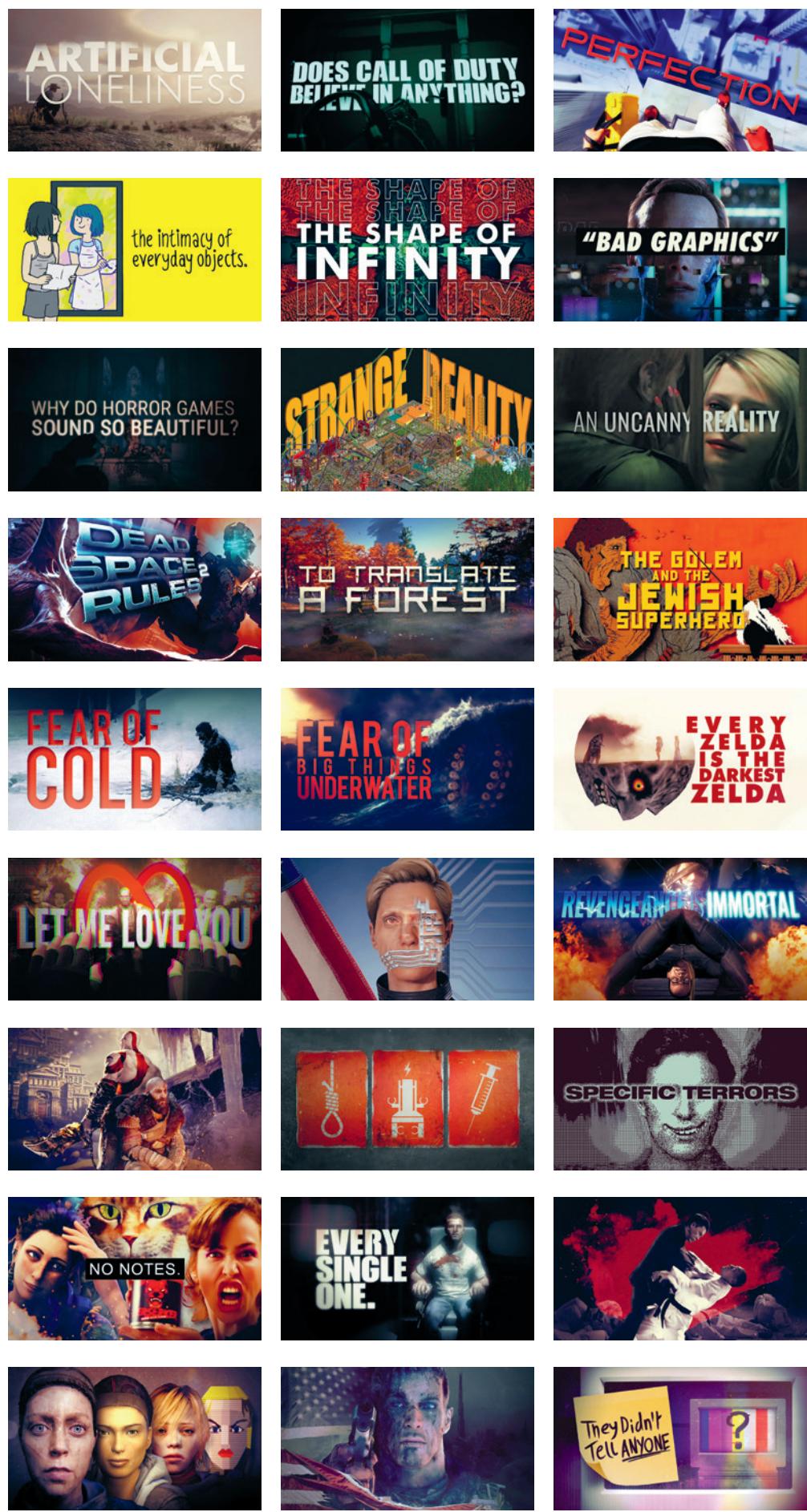
Most important is ensuring excellent legibility. Most viewers initially encounter videos in their recommendations, where thumbnails can appear smaller than a postage stamp. At these dimensions, intricate textures and details can become indiscernible or detract from the thumbnail's impact, so it's often best to omit them entirely. If you include text, keep it succinct. For visually striking imagery, create a strong contrast between the background and the focal point you want viewers to notice.
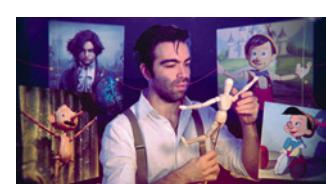
Trying to fit too many ideas into a thumbnail can result in a visually confusing result. Therefore, embracing a bit of ambiguity in the process can be beneficial. Jacob typically provides only a brief overview of his videos before we begin work, allowing us the freedom to focus on creating a compelling visual rather than minute details. Naturally, these principles can be adapted or even disregarded to make a bold statement. An unconventional or intriguing thumbnail can be effective if it resonates with the tone you're going for. "Gross Games about Flesh and Stuff", "Returnal is a Hell of Our Own Creation", and "Games that Aren't Games" to me best sum up the power of an unconventional thumbnail.

There are nuances in how I create images for Jacob that even I don't fully grasp. What they have in common, as evidenced by attempts from other creators to replicate their appearance, is the integration of text into the composition and a restrained colour palette. But there are numerous examples where these rules are intentionally broken. Sometimes, I use recurring motifs across a series of thumbnails that track how Jacob is portrayed visually. Other times, I aim to replicate promotional artwork, such as with the iOS game *Florence*, or simply create something visually striking, like the Orbital Lasers image.

Over time, what was once considered bold eventually becomes the trend. As this grid hopefully illustrates, creating your own style can help you stand out from others attempting to duplicate a pre-established formula.

This spread resembles the battle for attention on YouTube's homepage. When glancing across it, which thumbnails most effectively catch your eye?

THE SEARCH FOR THE LAST GREAT SECRET

GAMES OF 2020 AN EXTREMELY PROFESSIONAL AND COMPLETELY UNBIASED TAKE ON THE BEST

SEVENTY THOUSAND BILLION BILLION WORDS

CITIES WITHOUT PEOPLE

FEAR OF DEPTHS

four short games about pain

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENT

THE FUTURE OF WRITING ABOUT GAMES

UGLY GAMES

SAVE THE BEST

BURIED CITIES

BRIGHT UNBEARABLE REALITIES

SEARCHING FOR DISCO ELYSIUM

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOTLINE MIAMI 2

IMPECCABLE VIBES

TIME LOOP NIHILISM

GROSS GAMES ABOUT FLESH AND STUFF

HEAD TRANSPLANTS

IT'S A HIDDEN SCENE IN IMMORTALITY

TOP 10 2022

DISSECT PRESERVE AUTOPSY PREVENT

CAN IT BE DONE PERFECTLY?

TOP TEN

IT'S ALL REAL*

THIS IS NOT A GAME

ART CLIMATE HOPE DEATH

I CAN'T SHOW YOU

DO NOT LEAVE THE DARK

TOP GAMES 11

FEAR OF DARK

THEY DONT MATTER

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Even though each essay in "The Future of Games Writing" focused on a specific title, Jacob and I quickly agreed not to include game imagery in the thumbnail to avoid setting false expectations. Instead, my initial idea was to take a literal approach to the image: a computer prompt with a window displaying the video's title, as if it was the first page of that very essay. The monitor and user interface depicted are from a Macintosh SE: my very first computer. It was also a funny nod to how game writing's future may have been imagined on this vintage machine. If we were to recreate the thumbnail today, I wonder what type of computer would be more fitting?

A LITTLE NINTEN-DO SPIRIT

Supposedly, when Nintendo interviews new developers, it asks about interests beyond video games. This approach not only introduces fresh ideas but ensures development avoids becoming a closed loop of self-reference. Coincidentally, a similar philosophy applied to this project.

At the time, I had been immersed in recreating double-exposure imagery in Photoshop. I was also able to draw from my 3D Computer Animation degree to work with a 3D model of the Moon from *Majora's Mask*. Incorporating these two interests, the final composition seamlessly blends iconic scenes from two of the darker Zelda games. It goes to show how inspiration beyond just other YouTube videos can lead to distinct concepts.

BREAKING CONVENTION

This is my favourite composition I've created for Jacob to date, and it sums up what our creative collaboration allows. With every thumbnail I've crafted for myself and others, I've had the urge to break from established norms. Often I like to suggest the complete removal of text from a composition. This isn't to diminish the skill of creators who adeptly manage the interplay between text and visuals, but there's a distinct power in an image that can speak for itself. Here, the sheer oddity of the final image immediately captures your attention, even if you're unfamiliar with *Returnal* or *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*.
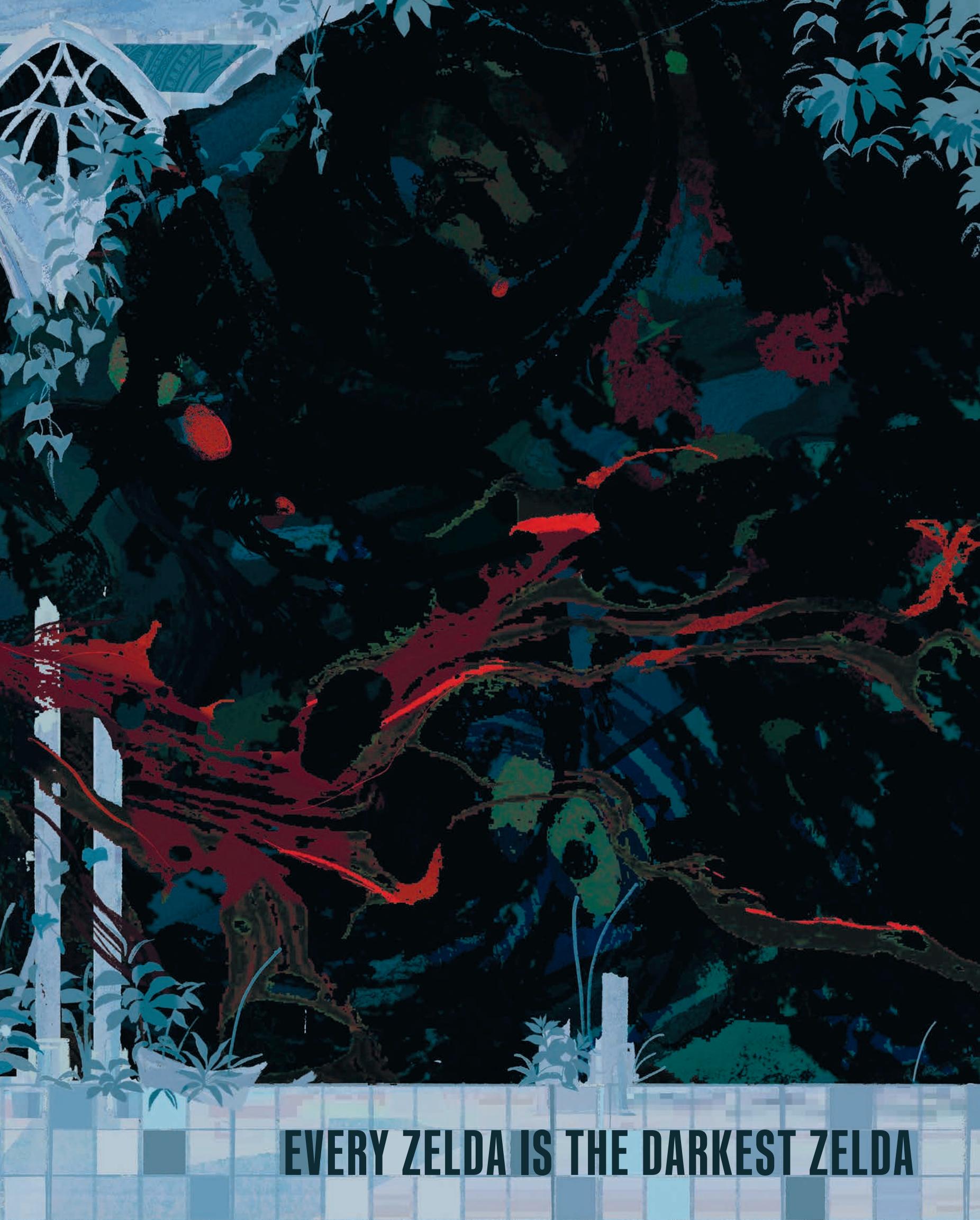
This project also highlights my favourite aspect of the creative process: unexpected revelations. Centering the face revealed a portion of the US flag in the background that added an unintended political dimension to the final concept. These serendipitous moments only emerge when you break free from the norm, and whenever possible, I strive to challenge conventions to allow such moments to naturally unfold.

EVERY ZELDA IS THE DARKEST ZELDA

EVERY ZELDA IS THE DARKEST ZELDA

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

**Mary Oliver, 2006
"The Uses of Sorrow"**

1

My god, does the opening of Twilight Princess still hit. The grandness of the start screen, immediately contrasted with the hushed tones of that first conversation. This is one of those games that functions as a time machine — I'm immediately transported back to the emotions of my first playthrough, and I'm so grateful for that.

The first Zelda game I ever played was *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*. It was the first "real game" I got for my Nintendo Wii, arguably the first "real game" I ever beat. Certainly, it felt the most meaningful at the time. *Twilight Princess* was the first encounter I ever had with the land of Hyrule, or Link, or Zelda, or Ganondorf. And in some ways, it's an ironic place for a kid to start out. Because *Twilight Princess* is the darkest Zelda.

I felt it right when I started the game.[1] The first scene of *Twilight Princess* is drenched in melancholy — two grown men, sitting together at dusk. "Loneliness always pervades the hour of twilight," one says. "The only time we can feel the lingering regrets of spirits who have left our world."

And after defining the twilight as a time of loneliness, a time of crossing over, the game proceeds to set a huge amount of its story at that very time, the entire kingdom shrouded in burnt orange and shadows. This is a story that's sparked by Princess Zelda giving up, averting a slaughter by conceding Hyrule to violent usurpers. It's a story where "all the people know is fear," where nature itself is cowed.

And shaped by the world, our protagonist, Link, is also at his most dangerous. He, and everything else in the game, are drawn with a more realistic brush than previous titles. He's an adult throughout. He scowls in his key art. He turns into a wolf, a badass dangerous animal. When Link learns new fighting

moves, he learns them from a dead and decaying older version of himself. When he finishes an enemy, he does it by plunging his sword into their heart. *Twilight Princess* is the only Zelda to be rated T for Teen — this *isn't* the Zelda game for "everyone," **so declares the ESRB.**[2]

The thematic threads of the game are far from a simple "save the princess" narrative. Instead, they weave around notions of power — who wields it, why they seek it out, and what they intend to do with it. For example, this is the game that introduces Zant, an unpredictable, unreadable antagonist. Zant seeks violence and power in an attempt to merge his shadow world with the light and throw everything into darkness. And he's not just driven by villainy, but a deranged impatience at the plodding, ineffectual monarchy of the land he's from. His need for conquest ties him to another power-seeker, Ganondorf, depicted in this game as a near-god. To Ganondorf, Zant is a puppet; briefly useful, discarded immediately after. Even Midna, Link's impish companion, is motivated by this need for strength. A huge amount of the game revolves around Midna's quest for the "fused shadow," a catalyst for a power she's barely able to control, a tool that when she first receives it, she immediately uses to just murder someone.

Even Link himself, Nintendo's most famous silent protagonist, a cipher for goodness and heroism, experiences his own reckoning with the nature of absolute power. In perhaps the game's most famous cutscene, Link watches a story of the world's genesis, one that doubles as a history of its conflicts. Himself and his childhood crush play both Adam and Eve, *and* Cain and Abel, turning on each other for the slightest chance at the strength of the Triforce. It is a scary and disturbing scene, full of dark voids, dead-pupiled heroes, and genuine terror from the characters. It also, most unexpectedly of all, ends with imagery that implies a power-fueled lust from Link; dozens of copies of the lover he just struck down now float towards him, a glimpse of what he might do were he given the magic of the gods. Then Link passes out, overwhelmed by the premonition.

Twilight Princess' visuals are consistently striking; certain scenes border on avant-garde. The final battle with Ganondorf, huge, climactic, ends with a strike played in silence against a background blasted white. The former villain, Zant, appears for just a moment and seems to snap his own neck; in that moment, Ganondorf dies too. And then the three just stand, wordless, **silhouetted by the setting sun.**[3]

One of the great joys of getting older and marginally wiser is going back to old favorite media and discovering new aspects of it. I'm sure everyone has had the

THE BEST IN HISTORY

I was about as primed as one could be to love *Twilight Princess* (*TP*). The second issue of *Game Informer* I ever received was the "Best Games of 2006" issue, in which *TP* received two perfect 10 review scores *and* the title of best game of 2006. I can almost recite the blurb from memory: "When the voting began for Game of the Year, the decision was unanimous. And when the voting for Greatest Game of All Time begins, don't be surprised if this game stands tall with the best in history."

A bit hyperbolic? Absolutely. But hyperbolically was how I absorbed games at the time — within my personal history of gaming in 2006, *TP* was easily the greatest game of all time. Many of my early gaming experiences are inextricably tied to what I read about those games prior to playing them. That *Game Informer* issue let me know that there was no ceiling to the enthusiasm I could feel about this particular Zelda.

2
I barely even notice age ratings now, but this is another detail meant to hearken back to my initial experience. At 11 years old, I had to argue to my parents that I was mature enough to handle a T-rated game! This dovetails nicely into the essay's central theme of how we define maturity.

3
For years before writing this essay, I wanted to figure out how to talk about *TP*. When I finally replayed the game in full, my first idea was a simple argument that *TP* was the darkest Zelda. But then I realized I'd have to argue for it being darker than *Majora's Mask*, and *Breath of the Wild*, and *Ocarina of Time*, and *then* I realized you could make real arguments for all those games being the darkest in the series... and then the essay came together in earnest. Always interrogate your premise before committing to a position!

experience of returning to a favorite movie or book and finding stuff that was always there, but too subtle or mature for our kid brains to pick up on. The most basic, and probably most common version of this is just humor — jokes that went over our heads.

`Ratatouille clip: "I have this tiny…little, uh,"`

`Scooby-Doo clip: "I'm Mary Jane."`
`"Like that is my favorite name!"`
`"Really?"`
`"Yeah!"`

These jokes rarely add much depth or complexity to a work, unless you consider Shaggy liking weed or animated characters making dick jokes "complexity." They're more like concessions to teens and parents, winks to the knowing. They're indications that yeah, this movie was made *for* kids, but it was made *by* adults who know what weed and dicks are. A more advanced version of the adult jokes are full-blown parodies of things a younger audience may have never encountered. I'm sure I'm not the only one who watched a "so random" episode of *The Simpsons* as a kid, only to have a sudden understanding years later while watching *The Shining*, or *Cape Fear*, or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. **Walking backward into culture**[4] like this was an integral part of my childhood, and let me feel like I was watching something that existed beyond what I had already felt.

But the much more exciting and meaningful revelations typically occurred when the revisited piece of media didn't just hold adult jokes but whole themes and philosophies that we never consciously clocked. Some of the absolute classics of kids' literature — *The Giving Tree*, **The Little Prince,**[5] *A Wrinkle in Time* — are classics in large part due to how mature the themes are. They're not hiding their depth or making it inaccessible; those books are just writing about emotional experiences that children likely haven't fully articulated yet. Part of being a kid is wondering why a grown-up is crying while reading a book about a tree out loud, and a part of being an adult is being the crying reader.

And I think, even without comprehending everything going on, you can sense that richness as a child. You know that there *are* things in this that are going a little over your head even if you're not quite sure how to name them. It's what made books and movies and games feel great and powerful and unknowable. I think what I wanted most as a kid was the feeling that media wasn't talking down to me. I wanted to be given feelings I didn't have the words to explain. It's why *Twilight Princess* was so exciting. Yes, this was a video game, yes it was on the Wii, but I could point to the darkness, to the things I didn't quite understand, and say, "There's *something* there."

If you're familiar with the Zelda series' production history, you probably know about the development of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. It was a game made in less than two years to capitalize on the runaway success of *Ocarina of Time*. It's why the

Ganondorf's strikingly composed death in *Twilight Princess*

scale of the game is smaller and some of the assets reused. And yet, either despite or because of this frenzied production, **directors [Eiji] Aonuma and [Yoshiaki] Koizumi**[6] somehow ended up making *Majora's Mask* the darkest Zelda.

Is there a more unsettling start screen than *Majora's Mask*? Silence except for the mask spinning past, the salesman exalting it like a divine object as one or both of them cackles, the tranquil scenes of Clock Town eventually revealed to be under a horrible moon inexorably falling towards Earth? And then, immediately upon beginning the game, an opening crawl tells you that Link has "crept away from the land that made him a legend," wording that conjures the image of a boy unable to handle the fame and heroism placed upon him. And then we see him, slowly plodding through a tall, dark forest, until he's suddenly robbed, dragged alongside his horse, and falls down an enormous hollow trunk, buffeted by mysterious symbols all the way. He's transformed against his will and meets the man from the opening who asks, "You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you?" And *then* he finds out the world is going to end.

Three days is all the time Link has, to gather the giants and solve every problem and somehow push the moon back into the sky. It's an impossible task and not enough time, not nearly, and it's all put on the back of a child who's already fleeing the weight of his expectations. It is an unfair request for Termina to make of Link, but it's one he has to fulfill all the same. *Majora's Mask* is a game about fighting inevitability, about seeing the dark fate of everything over and over and over again. The annihilation caused by the moon falling into Earth isn't simply a fail state, but a threat that the player has to use, confronting people in the midst of their grief or denial while the bringer of mass death hangs just overhead. The clock tower rings again and again and again. This is how the world ends, this is how the world ends, **it's 5:30, it's 5:40, it's 5:50, it's-**[7]

6
Koizumi is also responsible for much of the pathos present in *Super Mario Galaxy* — he pushed for the inclusion of the surprisingly affecting storybook sections. There's a similar surreality present in both *Galaxy* and *Majora's Mask*, and apparently this tone really works for me because I've written about both of those games! Koizumi has also talked about having to slip this thematic pathos past Shigeru Miyamoto, who's much more focused on games solely being fun.

7
Writing the sections on each game's darkness was a fun exercise in removing all nuance for the sake of tone. Nothing I say about the games is factually inaccurate, but each description gives a stunted, incomplete picture. At some point, I wanted the audience to realize that these summaries were going a little too far — I wanted viewers to arrive at the idea that "darkness is not a narrative" even before I stated it explicitly.

8

I encountered the "Ben Drowned" creepypasta before actually playing *Majora's Mask*. When I finally played the game, I realized that many elements I assumed the creepypasta invented (the tortured mask transitions, the creepy statue of Link) were actually part of the base game! Similar to *Shadow of the Colossus*, the strangeness inherent to *Majora's Mask* makes it a perfect vessel for audience mythmaking.

I do have a broader theory about why video game horror stories are so successful. When playing a game, we're encouraged to gain complete knowledge of its world. With enough playtime, almost any game can become perfectly predictable. And yet, most of us have absolutely no idea how a game actually *works*. We don't know how its engine creates physics, or how its scripting affects the behavior of NPCs. In a creepypasta, a game almost always violates the rules of its own world; the predictable becomes unpredictable, and we're forced to confront the fact that we know almost nothing about the laws of its constructed universe.

9

I chose to focus on Animorphs in this essay, but another option for this section could have been A Series of Unfortunate Events, a franchise utterly obsessed with the pursuit of darkness. I loved the series as a kid and remember trying to ape Lemony Snicket's indulgently weird writing style far before I could pull it off. However, because the series is so obviously dark, it doesn't have the subversive element of the Animorphs anti-war reveal. Fortunately, I was still able to spotlight Unfortunate Events a year later in my essay "Fear of Big Things Underwater."

It's no surprise that *Majora's Mask* is host to far more theories and urban legends than the rest of the series. Thousands argue that the game's major missions represent the stages of grief — they say even the game's structure is wrapped around the sense of mourning. One step further, another theory says, Link has actually been dead since the very beginning, each person and creature another manifestation of his dying mind. Not only that, says the internet legend, but the themes extend beyond the game's programming. **"Ben Drowned," the most notorious video game horror story.**[8] A dead boy's spirit said to remain within this cartridge. It makes sense, in the logic of spooky myth. What game could he possibly inhabit except this one, a game made for children yet obsessed with death? All of this seems to circle around the character of Skull Kid, a particular fixation, a tragic figure, a child made into a husk, the subject of a horror movie we're only privy to a fraction of.

You can't blame the memers, either. So much of *Majora's Mask* feels like it lives in the realm of exaggerated playground stories, bits and pieces you'd hear about from friends that couldn't possibly be real. Link doesn't just transform into other creatures when he puts on a mask, he does so in a seemingly agonizing process. Those masks aren't generic figures either; they're dead characters in the game, some who perish right in front of us. It is a game in which you must inhabit the dead to continue. And as a cherry on top, you're eventually taught the "Elegy of Emptiness," a song that manifests a statue of that previous life except with blank, vacant eyes...or whatever the hell this is.

It is not just an oppressive game thematically, it is oppressive mechanically, a ticker that gradually builds up the weight of the world on your shoulders, over and over, only able to be offset, never removed.

As a kid, darkness in media can make it feel more valuable.[9] Because, whether we conceptualize it this way or not, I think early art can be a kind of training ground for experiencing emotions before we have to feel them in the real world. And positive experiences don't necessitate training wheels — we don't need a trial run for having a great day, or passing all our tests, or living with a happy family. Maybe that's why I decided these were the first media I was "too old" for. I didn't want to be talked down to, and stories without conflict were exactly that.

But dark stories, stories with death or violence or despair, now *there* were thought experiments that I wanted to play. How would I feel and act if I lost a loved one? Would I hold myself together if I knew the world was ending? How many orcs could I kill? (That last one is seriously a conversation I had with myself all the time. Aragorn could kill dozens, and obviously I wasn't as strong or good as Aragorn, but maybe I could still take on three or four). And written well, these stories can be more than just directionless thought experiments but *guides*, introducing us to new strategies for difficult situations or warning us of potential pitfalls. I'm not saying any of this was conscious — I wasn't choosing books to learn how to deal

with sadness. But sometimes, that happened anyway. And often, those would be the books I thought about the most.

I've talked before about my love of the Animorphs series — every time I went to the library I would check out about eight of them, never in order, just whatever they had. And by doing this repeatedly over a period of several years, I think I read almost all of them (except *Megamorphs 2: In The Time of Dinosaurs*). One of the reasons I was so infatuated with them was that they were violent, and often scary, and the characters had to make really hard decisions. But as a kid, I never really thought about what the books were doing with this darkness. I just kinda liked their vibe. I was a kid.

I bring up Animorphs because it's good as hell, but also because, in the present, we have the rare treat of the author acknowledging the darkness and explaining its purpose — **all without ruining the thing!**[10] After the finale of the series, she wrote this letter, which I've very slightly paraphrased (uhh, Animorphs spoilers I guess):

K.A. Applegate: Quite a number of people seem to be annoyed by the final chapter in the Animorphs story. There are a lot of complaints that I let Rachel die. That I let Visser Three/One live. That Cassie and Jake broke up. That Tobias seems to have been reduced to unexpressed grief. That there was no grand, final fight-to-end-all-fights. That there was no happy celebration. And everyone is mad about the cliffhanger ending.

So I thought I'd respond.[11]

Animorphs was always a war story. Wars don't end happily. Not ever. Some people who were brave and fearless in war are unable to handle peace... Always people die in wars. And always people are left shattered by the loss of loved ones…

Here's what doesn't happen in war: there are no wondrous, climactic battles that leave the good guys standing tall and the bad guys lying in the dirt. Life isn't a World Wrestling

AN OVERDUE REVIEW OF *MEGAMORPHS 2*

Not having read *Megamorphs 2: In the Time of Dinosaurs* is a continuation of a bit from my 2020 essay about libraries, in which I talked about never being able to find that particular title. This is a bit that can be laid to rest because in the process of writing this book, I ACTUALLY READ *MEGAMORPHS 2*!! Here's my short book report:

Megamorphs 2 is absolutely bananas, and I mean that in the most complimentary way possible. The kids are sent back to the Cretaceous period after the explosion of a nuclear bomb in the present day tears open a hole in spacetime. When they arrive, two members of the team are immediately swallowed by a kronosaurus and nearly digested before disemboweling the dinosaur from the inside. Eventually, the characters run across not one but *two different* advanced alien species that lived on Earth in this prehistoric period. One of the alien species is friendly and nonviolent, the other is not. The kids help the friendly aliens win a small-scale battle, only for the unfriendly ones to *divert a comet directly towards Earth*. Although the kids have the opportunity to redirect the comet, they realize with horror that if they do so, the dinosaurs would never be wiped out and therefore humanity would never evolve. The book ends with the asteroid annihilating both the friendly alien species and the dinosaurs, its shockwave throwing the kids back into the present.

The characters are consistently and sympathetically written, the sci-fi concepts are thought-provoking, and the story fits a few dozen great ideas into a book that can be finished in an afternoon. Although the prose is predictably basic, the worldbuilding and genuinely thrilling twists of *Megamorphs 2* only confirm my love for the series. Also, everyone gets to morph into a T-Rex.

10

In a world of J.K. Rowlings and Orson Scott Cards, be a K.A. Applegate.

11

Applegate spells out her reasoning so clearly and courageously, I initially read this as a repudiation of the sadistic patriotism that gripped America following 9/11. However, the final Animorphs book was released in May of 2001, and Applegate's letter was published that July. Over the following years, her readers would witness the very tragedies she warned of.

12

There's an ancient piece of Animorphs fan software called "The Anibase," still available from an archived version of Scholastic.com (recommended OS: Windows 95, 98, or 2000). In The Anibase, Applegate provides further commentary on the end of her series: **"I knew I wanted it to end with victory, but I also knew I didn't want a clean victory. I wanted more Lord of the Rings, less Star Wars in the ending. I always admired the way Tolkien gave his characters victory, but left them with a sadder, less exciting, less enchanting world in the end."**

K.A. Applegate, how much would I have to pay you to write "Every Animorphs is the Darkest Animorphs?"

13

As with my descriptions of the darkest Zelda plots, my summaries are obviously excluding a lot of the substance of the Animorphs series. You don't get 60+ books in a series that are *all* dark and rich and meaningful. Many of the books were ghostwritten, many are overtly silly. But I don't think I'm mischaracterizing the series' darkness, given where it starts and where it ends.

14

Stories about the apocalypse will never go out of style, because "I feel like my world is ending" is a fundamentally human experience. We always have our own personal moons crashing into our own personal Earths (for more, see "Art in the Pre-Apocalypse," page 116).

Federation Smackdown. Even the people who win a war, who survive and come out the other side with the conviction that they have done something brave and necessary, don't do a lot of celebrating. There's very little chanting of 'we're number one' among people who've personally experienced war.

I'm just a writer, and my goal was always to entertain. But I've never let Animorphs turn into just another painless video game version of war, and I wasn't going to do it at the end ... And to tell you the truth I'm a little shocked that so many readers seemed to believe I'd wrap it all up with a lot of high-fiving and backslapping. Wars very often end, sad to say, just as ours did: with a nearly seamless transition to another war.

So, you don't like the way our little fictional war came out? You don't like Rachel dead and Tobias shattered and Jake guilt-ridden? You don't like that one war simply led to another? Fine. Pretty soon you'll all be of voting age, and of draft age. So when someone proposes a war, remember that even the most necessary wars, even the rare wars where the lines of good and evil are clear and clean, end with a lot of people dead, a lot of people crippled, and a lot of orphans, widows and grieving parents.

If you're mad at me because that's what you have to take away from Animorphs, too bad. I couldn't have written it any other way and remained true to the respect I have always felt for Animorphs readers.[12]

I will not attribute my current-day politics to Animorphs. I do not think they're the reason I don't like war. But I read these books *so* much as a kid. I read them far before I read about World War II, or Vietnam, or Iraq. And Applegate knew that, one day, I and all the other kids reading her books *would* read books, and watch movies, and consume propaganda, about war. She knew that the world we lived in wasn't frictionless, and to pretend it was would be doing us a disservice. The darkness wasn't just Animorphs' hook — it was central to the series ethos. If you didn't understand its darkest themes, you couldn't fully understand *it*.[13]

There is no such manifesto from the directors of *Majora's Mask* on why, precisely, they used the themes that they did. But you don't need to hear their explicit goals to understand why people care so much about it. It is a Zelda game about the end of the world and it doesn't blunt that feeling because kids will be playing it. And as a result, *Majora's Mask* is both generally a fan favorite and the subject of so much theorization. Its undeniable darkness almost begs for analogies — to the stages of grief, to climate change, to life after death.[14] *Majora's Mask* lets its characters — and its player — *live* in darkness for so much longer than

most media does. It doesn't snatch its apocalypse away. The game forces Link to examine it from every angle, and as he does, the questions of what *you* would do, who *you* would be, become unavoidable.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild is the best-selling game in the franchise, a near-ubiquitous title for the near-ubiquitous Nintendo Switch. It's a reinvention of the series in a new genre, a reimagining of the traditional puzzle structures, a reason to be excited about open-world games again. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that, with every other change to the formula, Nintendo also decided to make *Breath of the Wild* the darkest Zelda.

Breath of the Wild is explicitly, definitively, a post-apocalyptic game — albeit, a very green one. Humanity only exists in small enclaves, separated by vast stretches of wilderness. The castle sits at the center of the kingdom, vast but uninhabitable, pulsing with evil. And littering the landscape are reminders of the main characters' mistakes. These robotic guardians were created by the Sheikah, made by the "good guys," but the robots were almost immediately corrupted and absolutely overwhelmed the kingdom. Hyrule built weapons of war, and those weapons only ushered in its own destruction. And the heroes of the game, Revali and Urbosa and Daruk and Mipha, all died before they could meaningfully fight back.

Link remains, kept in suspended animation for 100 years, and Zelda too, imprisoned by overwhelming evil for just as long. And because they're still around a century later, they have to live with their defeat. Link, unable to hold back the horde of corruption, Zelda, incapable of using her powers until most of her friends are

already dead. It is a game in which each acre, every abandoned stable and crumbled temple and forgotten spring, **is a monument to your failures.**[15]

Contrary to the frustrated memes of kids in English classes, the curtains never have to be "just blue" in art. Subtext, metaphor, thematic parallels can be read from everything. You can draw meaning from a plot point or item description, *even if* the author thought they were just creating some curtains. And these interpretations are not inherently lesser, provided you can support them with evidence from the text.

And as I said, being an adult with fully operational analytical abilities makes it fun to return to the media we enjoyed as kids. But often, I see a secondary motivation slip into this kind of nostalgic reinterpretation. Not only do people want to see if they can pull more meaning from childhood favorites, but we also want to validate the time we spent with them — and we do so by burdening those favorites with newfound "mature" readings.

I am no stranger to this, of course — I'm an adult who talks to other adults about video games, it's kinda part of the job. But this can also manifest in some of my least favorite types of "analysis." A phenomenon I'll call the "secretly fucked up the whole time" reading. You don't have to look far on the internet to find these. Turns out…the Rugrats are all dead, except for Angelica! Turns out…Nemo never existed and Marlin is just coping with his dead fish wife! Turns out every freaking story ever told is actually just a dream or hallucination in the mind of the dying protagonist! They're inane, purposeless fantasies that don't add any meaning to the story other than some abstract idea of, "Wouldn't it be messed up if this was the case?"

And while I recognize that a lot of these are essentially just people doing silly creative writing exercises, they're also fundamentally recontextualizing these stories as something they're not, ignoring the existing narrative and themes to construct ones of their own. At their worst, these theories not only try to mutate the media but the *audience. Finding Nemo,* if it's a story of a father's hallucinated grief child, is no longer a movie for kids. If *Willy Wonka* is actually about sacrificing the contest winners to an elder god, then sure, your nephew might "like" *Willy Wonka* but he doesn't really "get it." Nevermind that the actual, stated narrative might be both interesting and enriching, it's all a cover for the real fucked-up story.

This is most clearly illustrated in the popularity of "icebergs" for various media properties. Icebergs take the form of this picture, separated into several different levels, with a variety of secrets and fan theories scattered across them. As you get deeper into the iceberg, the ideas only get more…twisted. For instance, an iceberg on Mario might have "Luigi is Mario's brother!" at the top, but get to the bottom and you've got, "Every Mario character is a representation of a different deadly sin." Icebergs are fun and goofy and often just a representation of how deeply a

16

I made my own iceberg and deadly sins chart (shown left) for this essay. With apologies to Hieronymus Bosch, I think the deadly sins piece is some of my best work.

17

My first experience with *Wind Waker* took place in the short period of time in which hotel TVs had pay-per-view video games. My parents somehow agreed to let me play the GameCube locked to the television. I immediately jumped into *Wind Waker*, but couldn't get past the part where you have to swing across ropes inside Tetra's pirate ship. I fell off the ropes again and again, my paid-for hour ran out, and I sadly turned the TV back to *Mythbusters* or something. I remembered the section as brutally difficult, then completed it first try as an adult.

fan community has spiraled in on itself. But their structure also implies a direct correlation between darkness and knowledge of the media. To know that Luigi is Mario's brother requires only passing knowledge, but to comprehend the seven deadly sins analogy necessitates deep, involved insight into each of the characters' psyches. Or at least, **that's what it gives the impression of.**[16]

In reality, Luigi *is* Mario's brother, and the Mario characters are *not* representations of the seven deadly sins. But such bizarre arguments take hold because of a two-part implicit hierarchy: that "adult" readings of media are superior to "kiddy" ones, and interpretations of media that are dark, twisted, and disturbing are inherently more "adult" than ones that are not.

Although the cultural tide has rightfully turned, upon **The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker's**[17] release, many fans were disappointed with the cel-shaded, quote-unquote "cartoony" look of the game. Nintendo had previously shown a tech demo with a more realistic style, and so *Wind Waker's* brighter aesthetic was a surprise and letdown to some. The superficiality of this take is obvious, especially when considering that *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* is the darkest Zelda.

> It's partway through the game when you discover the nature of the oceans that cover the map. Because *Wind Waker* isn't set in a different location than the more terrestrial Zeldas — it's the same Hyrule, simply drowned, the first half of Noah's story but the waters never receded. And like Noah, the devastating flood is theoretically divine, brought on not by Ganondorf but by the gods in an effort to stop him. What ultimately stops him is not nature, but Link and

A pile of Zelda titles, all competing to take the title of darkest

the Master Sword. Where floods failed, sharp violent head trauma succeeds. But his demise isn't the most striking part of the game — that honor goes to the descent into old Hyrule, when you sink below the waves and enter a castle frozen in time, **its spires stretching towards the surface, and find- //**[18]

▸ it floating over a lake of lava and the rest of Castle Town apparently zombified, with terrifying "ReDeads" grabbing you and shrieking. Link's expedited adulthood is met with a world that is darker in every way. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* loves to spring the "sudden horror" trope on you, whether that's a zombie in town, a detached hand that drops from the ceiling, or the bottom of a well full to the brim with skeletons and illusory walls. But none of these fleeting scares compare to where the game finishes. After repeatedly jumping forward and back in time, finishing off Ganondorf with another punishing final blow, and sending him screaming back into the void, Zelda tells Link to go home, regain the time he lost. "Home," she says, "where you are supposed to be...the way you are supposed to be..."

She plays the ocarina and Link is, once more, thrown into the past. But Link, the boy, is from a forest community, where they never grow old and eternally live alongside a fairy companion. And Link's fate at the end of *Ocarina of Time* is neither of these things; he will grow old — we've seen him do it. And the last moments of the game see his fairy, his link to the forest, wordlessly leave him. Link walks out of the temple of time alone- //

▸ and realizes that the entire island, every person he's met, helped, connected with, is part of a dream. And the villagers' naivete doesn't make it any easier to confront the notion that ending the game means ending the dream and ending the dream means ending...all of this. It's a game where accomplishing

Link's given goal means ignoring Link's emotional bonds, and while the island itself might not be real, those absolutely are. Link- //

▸ drops an entire island on the monster, but that isn't enough to stop it. Instead, the imprisoned transforms into Demise, a sort of primal god of anger and violence and blood. Demise first calls Zelda a "bag of flesh," which, oof, and then fights you on a mirrored sea of clouds. What's so dismaying about Demise isn't just his physical intimidation, but his place in history. *Skyward Sword* is chronologically the very first Zelda, meaning that Demise's promise at the end of the game, to be bound to Link eternally, to haunt him as the source of all monsters, to doom him to "wander a blood-soaked sea of darkness," is a prophecy that comes *true*, over and over and over again, meaning- //

▸ that humans have altogether abandoned the surface, hiding in caves, forced out of sight. **Link isn't just an adventurer, he's the *only* adventurer in a- //**[19]

▸ dark world the exact size of the light one, a twisted version of the sacred realm, a- //

▸ "Lorule" that is essentially a world without a hero, a crumbling kingdom that created an antagonist whose only real motivation is to not let her world die, which is why- //

Ocarina of Time/Link's Awakening/Skyward Sword/A Link to the Past/A Link Between Worlds is the darkest Zelda.

The problem, ultimately, is what that darkness leaves you with. I could write 90% of an essay on how any of these games are the darkest in their series, but then you get to the end, and…what? "Isn't it crazy how messed up this is?" It's an empty reading, substanceless. Ironically, it's juvenile. Being "messed up" is not a theme. Darkness is not a narrative. Violence on its own is not mature. Every description I've given thus far is missing the crucial piece, the *so what*, the *why should I care*?

Because *Twilight Princess* is not just about fighting and avant-garde choices and ominous visions; it's a game where those darker aspects framing the world make each act of kindness stand out more; Zelda's generosity, Link's inspiring bravery, every random townsperson's will to survive. It becomes a story about relying on others, a group of strangers able to survive in the twilight only due to the support they receive from each other. Link never succumbs to the ominous vision he received *because* he never attempts to do it alone — unlike Ganondorf, Link's fight is never for individual glory. And at the end, Link loses one of his closest friends, not through violence or tragedy, but because they both understand they have a responsibility to their own homes. Midna leaves because her community needs her and she, now, **understands how important her support is to them.**[20]

And *Majora's Mask* isn't just about the inevitable end of the world, it's about recognizing that inevitability and *still* choosing to fight against it, resisting

19
Looking back at this, I think it would have been fun to do this last section in reverse chronological order, letting the series travel backwards in time. Not only would it be visually compelling to watch the graphics get more primitive, having the last description of darkness be about the very first Zelda game would have driven home the point about this omnipresent darkness even more strongly.

20
Thinking again of that K.A. Applegate quote about Lord of the Rings. **"Tolkien gave his characters victory, but left them with a sadder, less exciting, less enchanting world in the end."** Zelda games virtually never end with sequel teases. So many of these games have bittersweet endings because they truly do *end*, and both you and Link have to come to terms with the adventure being over. Link was the chosen one, he did what the chosen one was supposed to do, and now he has to figure out what the rest of his life looks like.

THE USES OF SORROW

Early on in my video essayist career, I decided that rather than detailing the video in my YouTube descriptions, I would include an epigraph: a few lines from a thematically-related poem. Almost no one reads the descriptions anyway, so this is mostly just a little treat for myself. "Every Zelda is the Darkest Zelda" might have my favorite poem/video pairing; the description box reads:

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

The quote is almost the entirety of "The Uses of Sorrow," a poem by Mary Oliver. But I left out one crucial line, held in parentheticals just below the poem's title: *(In my sleep I dreamed this poem).* I adore this addition. Already, the poem confesses something that took the author "years to understand." With the addition of the parenthetical, understanding the darkness's purpose necessitates a dive into the author's subconscious. Entering the dreams of Mary Oliver to find the gift of darkness is such a beautifully evocative idea. My essay is far more explicit and explanatory, but I do think several of its core themes came to me while I was in bed and on the edge of sleep.

what seems **inescapable with every last breath.**[21] If *Majora's Mask* is a metaphor for grief, or climate change, or whatever else, it's a metaphor that begs you to not lay down and accept them. Although time moves inexorably forward, and yes, **everyone will eventually die,**[22] that doesn't mean that the present is a lost cause. And even in the midst of Link's own grief, he finds meaning in helping others.

And *Breath of the Wild* may live in the post-apocalypse, but god, what a reminder that whatever we consider the apocalypse is that in name only. Although whatever we considered "the world" pre-disaster may have ended, there's still a world here and it's alive and passionate and wants to be heard. Link and Zelda may blame themselves for the passing of the old world, but their guilt doesn't prevent them from trying to heal the new one. And for everyone else, they don't particularly feel like they're living in the aftermath of something terrible; life just adapts, it keeps on happening.

To brand any of these games simply as "the darkest Zelda" is to miss the forest for the trees, focus on the storytelling methods without considering what the stories themselves are doing with them. Heroism shines when contrasted with the darkness. Acts of compassion mean more when stakes are high.

And this perspective also misses the levity of the stories, and what those moments contribute as well! A world without joy and humor isn't a compelling world to fight for. Every one of these games becomes meaningful through their lightest elements, absurd side characters and silly mini-games and the idea of Link not being heavy until he takes the metal boots out of his pocket and puts them on his feet. **Zelda games flourish in this twilight,**[23] the melding of light and dark. The disparate tones mutually empower each other.

> And *Wind Waker* may float above the ruins of a past world, but our characters float too, kept aloft by an incredible sense of exploration, the open ocean beckoning them in any way they choose, and //
>
> Link may not get to live in the perpetual adolescence of Kokiri forest but he learns that the world offers him so much more, that Hyrule is so much richer and more varied than the tiny woods he was previously confined to. He goes from a boy who doesn't fit in to an adult who learns he can adapt to

21

Once again, foreshadowing "Art in the Pre-Apocalypse."

22

This idea is even more resonant given where Link started in the previous game. All his friends supposedly stayed young forever in Kokiri forest. But he had to leave and enter the adult world, where everything changes and everything eventually dies. I love the idea that Link is still reeling from his newfound knowledge of mortality at the beginning of *Majora's Mask*. Making peace with death is his individual emotional arc.

23

Bringing it alllllll the way back to the beginning.

anything, face any task, and then he's able to take that knowledge forward with him, leaving //

The island not with a sense of dread, but hope. He's clinging to a plank, floating in the middle of the ocean, but Link smiles — with acceptance? With confidence in his choice? With the memory of Marin, who soars overhead? The game refuses to spell it out for us, but we can only assume that //

After his confrontation with Demise, Link isn't dispirited but self-assured. Demise has promised to return, again and again, but Link *is* strong enough to fight him, and what's more, he isn't alone. He has glimpsed the basest, most destructive aspects of his world and yet it's still beautiful, he flies forward knowing //

Every corner of the once-imposing land. **The forests, deserts, and mountains that were once so hostile are now familiar to him, and**[24] //

The Princess relents and sends them home, finally realizing that the stability of her own kingdom isn't worth the death of another, and //

Link touches the Triforce with a wish, not for ultimate power but simply to save the ones he loves, and //

We're left at the end with darkness, yes, a threat that never quite disappears. But we're left with hope, too.

24

This line, referencing the original *Legend of Zelda*, is one of my favorite twists on a game's darkness. The original *Zelda* felt so huge and full of mysteries upon release — now, nearly 40 years later, its twists and turns encapsulate warm and fuzzy nostalgia for a generation. Anywhere scary and unknown can become comforting and predictable, given enough time. There is vanishingly little written narrative in that first game, but the mechanical experience of playing it contains the darkness and the light all the same.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

By Matt Margini

I need to confess something. When I was a kid, I relied shamelessly — *relentlessly* — on guides. With Zelda games especially, like *Ocarina of Time*, I wouldn't creep an inch into an unfamiliar space without the plain text of a GameFAQ telling me exactly what I would find there.

"While in this part of the room, you are in danger of falling down the numerous pits which are hidden by fake floors, which are similar to the fake wall that you just passed through. To avoid these floors, stay in the shallow water the [sic] circles the room as much as possible. No pits appear in these tracks."

It seems clear to me now — even in the age of games *designed* to have their mysteries mapped and charted by a community, like the Souls franchise — that I wasn't playing these games on their own terms. The darkness that Jacob describes was always illuminated, its power always tempered by the glowing testament of some person, some impossibly selfless and generous rando on the internet, who found a way through already.

"This man is Kamaro, the ghost of a dancer who tried to choreograph a world-famous dance. But he failed to teach it to others before he died. Play him the Song of Healing that the Mask Salesman taught you, and his soul will become Kamaro's Mask. Once you have Kamaro's Mask, return to West Clock Town."

MATT MARGINI

(he/him)

Matt Margini is a writer and educator whose work has appeared in *Polygon*, *Heterotopias*, *The New Yorker*, and other places. He is the author of *Red Dead Redemption* for Boss Fight Books. He teaches a course on games at Ransom Everglades School in Miami, and he's grateful to Jacob Geller for always being the most inspiring guest speaker of all time.

"Every Zelda is the darkest Zelda because every Zelda is about growing up."

But I also remember a moment when the guide failed me. The year was 1999, and I was reading a FAQ for the *Ocarina of Time* fishing minigame by user "DaRk_OnE." Obviously, I, the anxious completionist, was hellbent on getting everything you could possibly get out of the *Ocarina of Time* fishing mini-game. But there was a whole section of the guide devoted to a legendary fish called the Hylian Loach — devoted, more specifically, to the fact that no one had figured out a definitive way to catch it.

```
"It does not appear very often and there is
no known fool-proof way to make him come out.
It is dark colored and thin like an eel with
small flippers.  If you are lucky enough to
see him, you can put on the iron boots and
Zora's tunic and take a good look at him.
Few people have caught him, and if you want
to see who has caught him you can take a look
at section VIII (my Hall of Fame) right at the
bottom of the guide.  … My friend just caught
the loach 2 days ago (grr) and now I
am determined to catch it myself."
```

Let me just take a moment to unpack the sheer, unmistakable Gellerism of this passage. First: a secret eluding players for years, inspiring a coterie of latter-day Ahabs to exchange tips and email addresses in pursuit of their elusive prey. And then: who doesn't miss that aura of enchantment that surrounded games in the '90s and 2000s, fueling playground rumors and feverish speculation? Who doesn't miss GameFAQs itself as an artifact of the intimate smallness of the early internet, before it became a morass designed for the hyper-efficient extraction of human attention?

But what I really like about this passage is its humanity. The way it addresses the reader as an equal, in a spirit of uncertainty.

We're all trying to catch the Hylian Loach. Here's what I've heard. Here's what might work.

We're all stumbling in the dark.

———

To point out that Zelda games are quest narratives goes beyond stating the obvious. It's *The Legend* of Zelda; the series borrows heavily from fairytales, myth, and folklore and deals explicitly with archetypes. That's one of the things that makes it fascinating and unique among video game franchises: it always appears to be pulling from a deep, ancient reservoir of ideas, even when its design principles are in dialogue with the shifting norms of the present.

As a *Zelda Dungeon* blog post from 2012 points out, nearly every game recapitulates the stages of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, "The Hero's Journey," from the call to adventure — Link wakes up, leaves behind his idyllic status quo — to the galvanizing experience of loss to the symbolic death and resurrection that enable his final triumph over evil. Like most quest narratives, the games also use the quest to represent the transition from childhood to maturity. *Ocarina of Time* makes this explicit; the adventure requires Young Link to become Adult Link, a role he must accept prematurely until he grows into it. But even the games that stay centered on Young Link or Toon Link show him developing into a more capable version of himself, not just physically but emotionally ("That look in your eye is not the one you left here with," says Orca the Sword Trainer when Link returns to Outset Island in *The Wind Waker*). Like the quest narrative's cousin, the *Bildungsroman* ("novel of development") in prose fiction, the games represent what it means to leave Kokiri Forest and become your own person in the world.

Every Zelda is the darkest Zelda because every Zelda is about growing up. Every Zelda is about gathering the strength and grace you need to face a world that is fundamentally harsh, alienating, and unjust. That, at least, is one of the things I see with new clarity when I, like Jacob, return to these games that I played when *I*

" So often, in Zelda, Link inherits a broken world from the generation who broke it in the first place."

was growing up — these games that I crept into with so much trepidation, guide in hand.

But I also see something else. I also see a series grappling with what it means to *be* a guide. *Zelda I* begins, iconically, with the old man in the cave who gives Link a sword and says, "IT'S DANGEROUS TO GO ALONE! TAKE THIS." The series has not stopped reinventing this old man, just as it has continually reinvented and reinterpreted Link himself.

In *A Link to the Past*, *Ocarina of Time*, and *Tears of the Kingdom*, the old man becomes Rauru, the Sage of Light. In *Wind Waker* and *Breath of the Wild*, he becomes the King of Hyrule. In *Twilight Princess*, he becomes the undead swordsman — as Jacob reminds us, a macabre and tragic version of Link himself.

Other guides appear throughout the Zelda timelines. The Great Deku Tree, whose ability to help Link is always hampered by his own decay. The many shriveled Sheikah monks in *Breath of the Wild*, defined equally by the power to move Link along in his journey and an inability to move themselves. What I find interesting is that virtually every one of these figures contains a mixture of light and darkness, wisdom and foolishness. Every one of them is pained by failure and regret.

Every incarnation of Rauru failed to seal off the Sacred Realm; every incarnation of the king — who *is* Rauru in *Tears* — failed to maintain the integrity of the kingdom. "Although I accepted life as the hero, I could not convey the lessons of that life to those who came after," the undead swordsman laments to the Hero of Twilight. "At last, I have eased my regrets." Imparting his final lesson releases the swordsman from ghostly torment, which also happens to be the common condition of all these figures as they await the hero's arrival for hundreds or thousands of years.

I think that's where part of the darkness of Zelda comes from: disillusionment. In a world that forces Link to grow up, the most grown-up figure of them all is a regretful revenant, half-responsible for the plight that has befallen Hyrule. As innocence gives way to experience, the darkness shrouding the Sage comes into clearer focus. Kaepora Gaebora, the wise owl who looms so large over Link's early journey in *Ocarina of Time*, reveals himself to be the animal avatar of a feckless gatekeeper. In *Breath of the Wild*, the benevolent (if prickly) king who seems to know so much about you at the beginning of the game, and who kickstarts your adventure in the guise of the Old Man, comes to look more and more like the inadvertent architect of the apocalypse. When you encounter Rauru for the first time in *Tears of the Kingdom*, he's nearly divine, a mythic goat-man from the remote past whose arm literally reaches across the ages to save Link's life. As you piece together the story, his human failings — pride, naivete, even narcissism — emerge.

The "wise old man" is a fixture of the hero's journey, and Jungian psychoanalysis — the theoretical foundation for Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory — has a specific take on what he might symbolize in stories of maturation. In his essay "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales," Carl Jung argues that the "wise old man" is not an independent entity. Rather, he externalizes the hero's own inner resources when those resources seem impossible to muster. The unconscious creates him, projects him, in a process Jung refers to as "anamnesis:" a process of *remembering* the power and potential of the self:

```
An anamnesis of this kind is a purposeful
process whose aim is to gather the assets of
the whole personality together at the critical
moment, when all one's spiritual and physical
forces are challenged, and with this united
strength to fling open the door of the future.
No one can help the boy to do this; he has to
rely entirely on himself. There is no going
back. This realization will give the necessary
resolution to his actions. By forcing him to
```

face the issue, the old man saves him the trouble of making up his mind.

Of all the games, *Twilight Princess* demonstrates this idea most overtly. The guide appears as a projection of the self, an alter ego, who reaches Link when he needs to be reached, and demands him to summon the courage he needs to face his demons. The swordsman doesn't have an objective existence beyond the realm of dreams or revelations; instead, he seems to emerge as a counterweight to Link's own insecurity and fear.

But I don't love the solipsism of that reading, or the solipsism of Jung's theory in general, even if I do love the idea that the point of the Sage is to unlock what was already dormant within the self. To me, the strange symbolic potency of this otherwise routine tutorial in *Twilight Princess* lies precisely in the fact that Link meets *another hero*. He isn't alone. And the other hero is not perfect, nor godlike, nor invulnerable to human frailties. He's simply more experienced in facing the pain and challenges of the world.

So often, in Zelda, Link inherits a broken world from the generation who broke it in the first place. His mentors helped create his problems. But is that a cause for disillusionment, or could it be a source of comfort? Is it darkness, or is it light?

———

If Zelda games are about growing up, coming back to them later in life is also about realizing that you aren't really Link anymore. Quest narratives tend to reach for the pressure cooker of adolescence; rarely do they concern themselves with the moral shapelessness of adulthood (If you want a quest narrative that does *that*, try *Baldur's Gate 3*).

For me especially, returning to these games involves realizing that I'm a lot more like Rauru, or the King, or the decrepit swordsman — not because I'm a *failure who caused the ruin of the kingdom* or whatever, but because I'm in the position of guide more often than not.

I'm a teacher. I teach high school English, and one of my courses focuses on the narrative capabilities of video games. Jacob is its patron saint; students watch his work and also try to emulate his unmistakable style, crafting their own video essays that attempt to extract meaning from the games they've played.

Celeste is a game about repression.

Disco Elysium is a game about self-mourning.

Mundaun is a game about nostalgia.

I have another confession to make: I've never made a video essay. It keeps me up at night sometimes, this sense that I shouldn't be asking my students to do something I haven't done myself.

But I've also come to cherish the way this one project puts me on equal footing with my students and allows them to achieve things so far beyond the horizon of my own experience and expectations. They know I cannot give them everything. They know they have to summon their own inner resources. Yet they also know that I am as invested in the project as they are, in part *because* I haven't done it myself. Something about that combination inspires them, and they make unbelievably inspiring work.

I think about what I wanted from my own teachers when I was their age. Sure, I wanted them to be smart. I wanted them to be inspiring. I wanted them to know more than I knew about the world. But I also wanted them to be human. And I think it was that humanity, more than anything else, that made me feel capable of doing something difficult or new.

I don't remember what it felt like to beat Bongo-Bongo or to find the last piece of the Triforce at the bottom of the Great Sea. But I remember what it felt like to catch the Hylian Loach.

ART IN THE PRE-APOCALYPSE
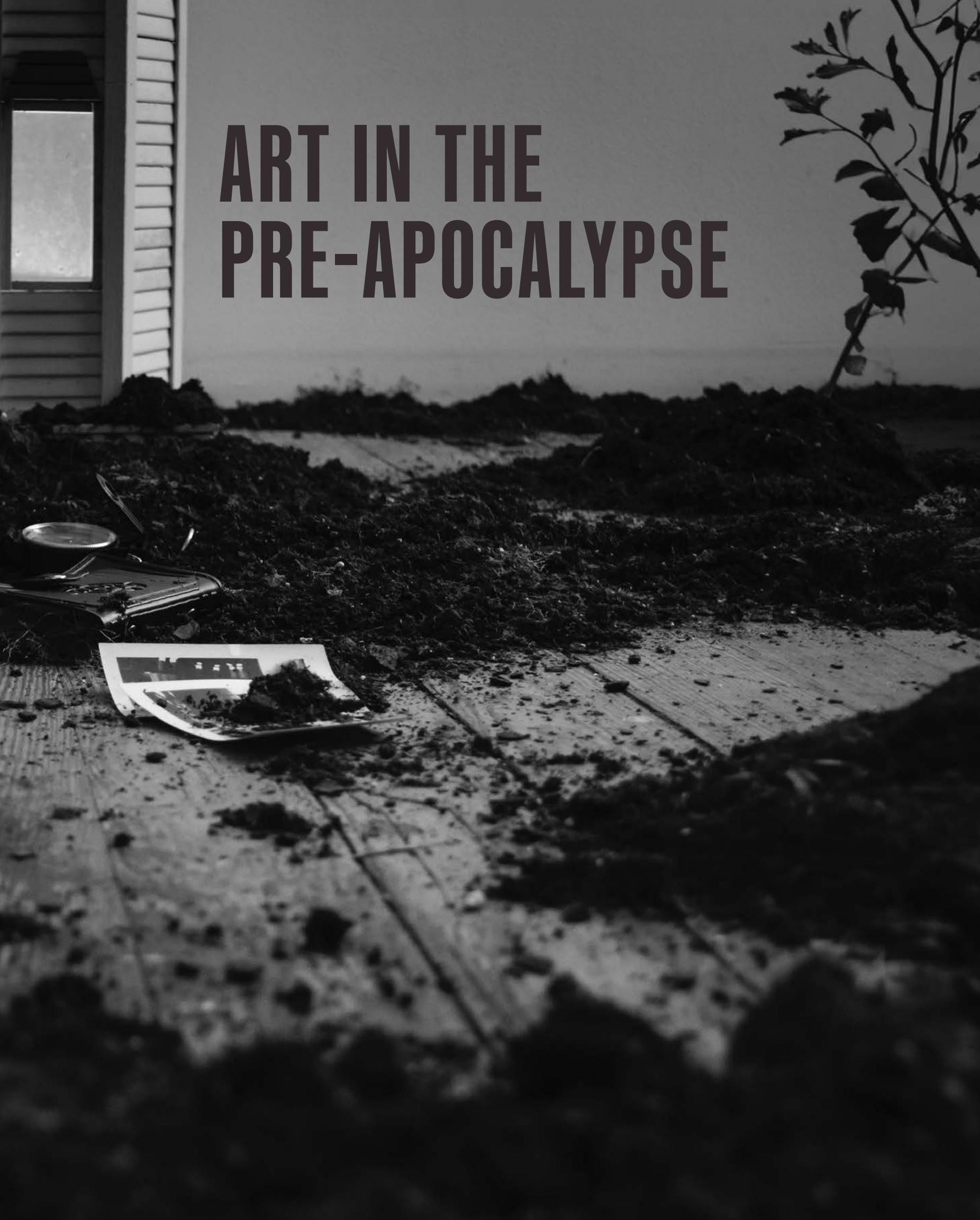
ART IN THE PRE-APOCALYPSE

And physicists rocketed copies of the decree to paradise in case God had anything to say, the silence that followed being taken for consent

Mary Karr, 1993
"Disappointments of the Apocalypse"

1

I have no single method for developing the idea for an essay. Sometimes I get the idea all at once while gaming or reading, sometimes it's more like a jigsaw puzzle I have to piece together. In this case, this moment — this particular *line* — in *Final Fantasy XVI* just hit me with such electricity that I knew I had to put it into something. The original idea I jotted down was: "what's the point of destroying the world?" — an exploration of how different games depict a total apocalypse. As I played *Season* and *Umurangi Generation*, that focus shifted into what the essay is now. But the *FFXVI* intro remained, a vestige of my original idea (and a catchy way to start a YouTube video).

This is an essay about catastrophe and death and despair and hope and two dozen other things. But first, there's a moment from the Bahamut fight in *Final Fantasy XVI* that I want to talk about. I mean, who am I kidding, there are lots of moments in that fight I want to talk about. It's a boss that takes 45 minutes to whittle down, with some of the most gonzo action put on screen in recent memory. There are Mothercrystals reforming, a whole on-rails section, music that's going appropriately bananas. But in the uhh, fourth or fifth or sixth phase of the battle, there's this one thing that happens that I keep thinking about.

See, Bahamut, this big creature you're fighting, has a series of flare-based attacks. "Megaflare," its smallest, is a destructive missile barrage. "Gigaflare," the next step up, is basically an orbital laser strike. "Teraflare," a tactical nuke. And these continue to escalate as the fight launches into literal space. Finally, Bahamut becomes so desperate to win he pulls out his last big trick…"Zettaflare." And our protagonist takes one look at "Zettaflare" and says the line, **"He would burn the world!"**

And then you win the fight. You push square really fast and push right through the charging Zettaflare, and totally own Bahamut. It's big, climactic, and very cool. It's also, weirdly, just the middle of the game. That's funny, right? Like, the plot of *Final Fantasy XVI* ultimately has to do with some other big world-ending guy, and you

spend hours getting to know him and stoically discussing all of his motivations. But here, for all of 30 seconds, there's a threat that's just as big. "He would burn the world!" we yell, the entire Earth below us in a sudden pre-apocalypse, every character, every motivation, every plot point immediately in mortal peril from Bahamut's one big last attack. And then it's over, the stakes defeated as quickly as they were raised. The pre-apocalypse is done, get moving to the next one.

It's not an unusual moment for the Final Fantasy series or even for media in general. God knows how many times we've seen the world on the brink of destruction, **averted by the heroic acts of some main character.**[2] Many times, the world doesn't even *know* how close it came to being destroyed — it's the heavy burden of the hero alone to know how near everyone was to oblivion.

For a story like this to function, it needs a couple things. A hero, for one, a Clive, a superhero, a James Bond. It also needs an extinction event that is eminently defeatable — Bahamut is the *whole* end of the world here, you beat him, you cancel the apocalypse. And often, you need a story largely uninterested in what that end-of-the-world would have actually meant. We get one line: "He would burn the world!" to sum up everything, everyone, dying, forever. And I get it. Because you give total annihilation more than a line and it will swallow your story whole. **No single moment can exist outside of it.**[3]

In 1957, Nevil Shute published *On the Beach*, a novel that is, in many ways, inextricable from its geopolitical context. In the years before the book's release, the U.S. and the Soviet Union both detonated hydrogen bombs hundreds of times more powerful than Hiroshima — as the book was written, the accelerating space race implied the ability to shoot missiles across the world. When it was published, the U.S.S.R. had over 500 nuclear weapons, the U.S., over 5,000. Naturally, *On The Beach* is about the end of the world.

It's not about explosions though — or at least, they're not given the spotlight. Instead, the book's tone is foreshadowed by its epigraph, a few lines from the poem "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot. You've almost certainly encountered this poem before, though you may not know it. *This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but...* you know the one.

On the Beach's plot is defined by a war we never see. We get sparse details — it lasted 37 days, it was between Russia, China, the U.S., Egypt, the U.K. And it ended after only a month because of the use of "cobalt bombs," nukes specifically designed to produce radiation, to poison the air and ground. The nukes worked — in that, almost immediately, the northern hemisphere made itself dead and uninhabitable. In *On the Beach*, however, all of this is just incidental conversation.

2

As I wrote this line, I thought about the game *Asura's Wrath*. It has perhaps the most bombastic version of "saving the world" I've ever seen; it's also a game I love so much that I've purposefully excluded it from other essays in order to give it the space it deserves sometime in the future. Stay tuned!

3

I'm typically far more interested in the large-scale, sociological perspective on an event than an individual one. Many of my essays eschew discussions of individual characters for this reason. However, this particular essay is a very conscious attempt to marry the large-scale and the small, to grapple with how it feels as an individual to exist during an institutionally driven end-of-days.

The powerful final moments of 1959's film adaptation of *On the Beach*

4

I first learned about the premise of *On the Beach* from my dad when I was probably ten years old. The book that I imagined based on that premise was very different from Shute's actual novel — I guessed it would be a much more visceral account of people loudly losing their minds. I was surprised and pleased to discover how understated the novel is, with almost none of the melodramatic freakouts I expected. Thanks Dad!

5

I could have spent more time on this aspect of the book, because it acutely describes the layered consciousnesses many of us have to deploy on a daily basis. We're *very aware* of the concurrent apocalypses we're living through, but that awareness doesn't preclude us from having to go to the grocery store and brush our teeth and stuff. Ultimately, I decided I didn't want to focus on inaction for this essay, since *Umurangi* and other examples presented such a compelling alternative. Don't hold your breath for the sequel to this video, "Compartmentalization in the Pre-Apocalypse," because that might be too depressing for even me to write.

The book's narrative is only possible because it's set almost entirely in Australia, a country not involved in the war and thus not irradiated — yet. But all the characters know that in an indeterminate number of months, the radiation from the north will blow down over Australia, blanketing their continent in poison too, an inescapable death they can see coming thousands of miles away. **It's a dread that swallows the story whole.**[4]

And yet, *On the Beach* is a fascinating book because you wouldn't have to excise *that* many pages to remove the nuclear threat from its plot entirely. For the majority of its length, people live remarkably boring lives. A couple plays with their baby and prepares the garden for next year. An American Navy member meets a young woman and spends time with her (but he's married so they don't do anything intimate). A scientist buys a sports car and finds that he loves racing. Shute has a resolutely matter-of-fact writing style; we're given few glimpses into the internal lives of characters, and even events of major importance rarely get more than a sentence. But because the end of the world is inevitably drifting towards them, everything becomes morbidly fascinating. Why would Mary be planting flower bulbs that won't come up until next year? Why would Dwight, the American Navy officer, buy a fishing rod for his son, why would he consistently reference returning to his wife, when his family was in a major U.S. city when the bombs hit?

Delusional isn't quite the word to describe the characters of *On the Beach* — they often recognize that **their behavior is irrational.**[5] Instead, I think Shute makes clear that they simply don't know how else to act. What is the logical time to stop your daily routine? What, concretely, do you change when confronted

with a six-month countdown? On one of the few excursions out of Australia, a group of Navy sailors take a submarine to Seattle, Washington. There's nothing left of practical use, but the city itself remains and one of the sailors jumps overboard and swims to the radioactive shore. The crew finds him hours later, fishing in a rowboat. You can picture how this scene would work in a different book: the deserter stark raving mad, the crew screaming for him to come back inside. But none of that happens here — there's no antipathy, no sense of betrayal, not even any confusion. He just chose a slightly different finish line than everyone else.

The conflict of the story isn't really experienced by any of the characters, at least not externally. But it's felt, omnipresent, by us, the reader, a pit in our stomach as a character blithely references all her friends having babies, a morbid understanding when an amateur car race results in multiple fatalities. The hook of *On the Beach* is seeing how the everyday warps, becoming beautiful or grotesque when framed by the end of days. The last character **swallows poison while watching the waves.**[6] No amount of heroism can avert it.

Much of *On the Beach* can't be separated from its 1950s publication date — the specific shape of the apocalypse for example, or its particular brand of domesticity. But many more parts of the book feel timeless; its yearning for normality in the face of catastrophe doesn't feel remotely dated.

Earlier this year, Scavenger Studios released *Season: A Letter to the Future*. It is not a game about the world ending, but it is a game about *a* world ending. And its cataclysm, gentle, green, quiet, runs both parallel and perpendicular to *On the Beach*. In the opening narration, *Season's* protagonist explains that this "season"— understood as not just a couple months but an entire era of the world — is about to end, that the world will be "turned inside out." Seasons are somewhat event-based, somewhat generational; there are older folks who remember a season of war, or a bliss called "the golden season." But this one — a season that doesn't even have a name yet — seems different. It doesn't feel like it's going to flow naturally into the next but slice the world into a before and after, an after that's robbed of the remnants of any previous era.

Our job, therefore, is to record. Not avert. This is an immediate consistency between *Season* and *On the Beach*; the end is a foregone conclusion. But unlike *On the Beach*, there's this idea that *someone* will be there to look back on the "before," someday. Our character, Estelle, is making a trek to "the museum vault," what she describes as a "palace of art and memory at the edge of the Earth," a place that can survive whatever's about to happen. But the museum isn't built to shelter humans. Instead, Estelle will be bringing a scrapbook to the vault, a scrapbook built from your experience of the game. She says that through her scrapbook, "this time on Earth could live on…what it looks like, sounds like, how it feels to be alive right now." **What that means is up to each player.**[7]

6
I don't think the 1959 movie version of *On the Beach* is particularly strong, but its final scene features an unforgettable choice of score. As Ava Gardner stands on the beach and watches the submarine sink below the waves, the film gives us a soaring rendition of "Waltzing Matilda." The song's patriotic self-importance is bitterly ironic in the face of a dead and empty world. A tattered sign over an abandoned square reads "There is still time…brother." It rules.

7
Season was a game that I was initially very taken by, and then my enjoyment gradually fell off due to the rigorously slow experience of playing it. However, part of the appeal of not attempting to write proper game "reviews" is that I'm free to purely focus on the interesting parts of the game without needing to address the fact that I found the rest of it lackluster. My esteemed YouTube colleague Big Joel once tweeted that conversations about art are very boring if your only question is if said art is "good" or not. It's creatively freeing to not feel like I have to give my take on *Season's* overall goodness.

8

It doesn't quite fit with the larger thesis of this essay, but the thematic richness of "escaping societal trauma by evoking mass amnesia" is just brilliant. I love any attempt to escape a haunting that results in *even more haunting*. Many of my thoughts on *Season* were shaped by conversations with Renata Price (page 40), who wrote her own excellent essay on the game.

9

Although I don't think this reading is inaccurate, it's a little uncharitable towards *Season*. I wanted to focus on the passivity of *Season's* ending to emphasize the difference in tone between it and the much more rebellious *Umurangi Generation*. A more generous reading would consider that since Estelle's scrapbook *did* survive, the city of the future didn't succeed in fully overwriting the memory of the past. Perhaps it's only because of the memories Estelle preserved over the course of the game that the next generation of humans was able to construct their glittering utopia. *Season* still has a more interesting ending than most video games — it just doesn't fully match with my own emotional experience of the pre-apocalypse.

And like *On the Beach*, it's a story free from almost any of the conflict you might expect. No one grows violent at the end, no one outwardly breaks down. But, unlike Shute's novel, this is true in part because most don't know the full scale of the change that's coming. Most of the game takes place in the Tieng Valley, a valley that, in only hours, will be flooded by a group called the Grey Hands. This is the known apocalypse; we find people in various stages of packing and memorialization for the home they'll soon have to leave. What vanishingly few of them are aware of is the second apocalypse, the greater one that will accompany the flood. They will simply forget. Everything. An apocalypse of memory, brought on by a prayer to the God of Forgetting, an apocalypse that will wipe out the legacy of seasons past just as the flood will wipe out its structures.

See, where previous seasons' vibes were "golden" or "war," we eventually learn that this season's overwhelming feeling is "haunted." Haunted by the war, haunted by the bliss of seasons past, haunted by memories which have literally crystallized, gems that jut out of the ground and whisper to anyone who cares to listen. And so the Grey Hands are orchestrating the destruction of both land and minds in order to move forward, in order to **escape this haunting.**[8]

But because almost no one knows they're about to lose their history, because even Estelle has no aspirations of stopping the change in season, the environment of the game is contemplative, peaceful, almost…polite. Everything stands still and waits for you to record it. Predictably, I took a lot of photos of sunrises and sunsets. I tried to capture the ramshackle art people made out of scrap metal. But accurately capturing the tenor of an entire era, in photos and sketches and a few audio tapes, feels hopeless. Estelle writes "I try to divide the things I see between two categories: permanent and impermanent. But the division breaks down. The difference is just a feeling."

The game ends, where else, on the beach. Estelle sets out on a boat as a vibrant shockwave rolls across the water. It annihilates her memories — she doesn't turn around to see what on the shore remains. I wonder how possible it is to truly eliminate a haunted era. I think back to a note Estelle wrote earlier in the scrapbook: "What we do to the land eventually makes its way into our blood and our brains."

In any case, the scrapbook survives. This we know, because just before the credits, a researcher in the far future reads her words in the Museum Vault and then steps out into a bright glass city. It's…a somewhat strange note to conclude on. The world survives, thrives, even. It literally looks like the meme template. I think the game wants us to consider if it was "worth it," the exchange of all history and culture for a tabula rasa to build the future upon. But the fact that the future is as bright and shiny as we see suggests that this total annihilation is a…valid strategy, you know? **It's saying that it *works*.**[9]

Photographing a protest in *Umurangi Generation*

And because of that, *Season's* tone comes off as a little mournful, a little commemorative, and a little resigned to this being "just how history goes." Do your best to remember with your scrapbook! Because everything else will be washed away, and that's the price of progress. *On the Beach's* lack of conflict is *because* we know there's no "after," not for humans anyway. It is a 300-page funeral procession. But in *Season*, Estelle is being actively denied a future by other living, decision-making humans in the plot. Where is her anger at being forced to exist in the pre-apocalypse? Where's her rage? Where's-

Umurangi Generation was released by Origame Digital in May of 2020. "Umurangi" is a word in Te Reo, a language spoken by less than 200,000 people, almost all of them in the indigenous Māori population of New Zealand. Umurangi means "red sky." It's a hint at the meaning of the title, a meaning that's eventually spelled out in the credits:

"DEDICATED TO THE UMURANGI GENERATION. THE LAST GENERATION WHO HAS TO WATCH THE WORLD DIE."[10]

I've started at the end because that's what the game does as well, the end of everything, the red sky generation. But even though it's all the end, you might not pick up on it at first. The first level feels pretty blissed out, you and your friends vibing on a rooftop skate park, artsy graffiti thrown across every wall. Your only job is to take pictures of your friends and particular objects and the mountain in the distance. It is, like *Season*, a game about capturing things through your camera. It is, unlike *Season*, a game furious with the fate it's been handed.

The particular shape of the apocalypse in *Umurangi* is actually closer to *Final Fantasy* than the other examples we've discussed thus far...it's kaiju. Part of the fun

10

This transition represents one version of the essay smashing through another. It would have been easy to continue channeling *Season's* sedate, mournful tone until the end — in some early outlines, that's exactly what I did. But *Umurangi* is too forceful a presence to allow for that. I realized I could leverage the jump between games to grab the audience and shake them awake. Sometimes, fighting to keep the audience's attention on YouTube can feel limiting; here, it matched the urgency of the crisis perfectly.

Given how accurately *Umurangi* depicts the feeling of today's social upheaval it's remarkable that Faulkner largely developed the game before COVID, 2020's Black Lives Matter protests, 2024's protests against the siege of Gaza, and many other crises of the last half-decade. Knowing the development schedule lends *Umurangi Generation* a feeling of foresight. The metaphorical — and often literal — "Red Sky" referenced in the title defines our current era. But like many other "future-predicting" media, *Umurangi* is merely a student of history. Faulkner could have dropped *Umurangi* in 2000, 1980, or 1950, and the game would have felt just as prescient.

12

I know the purpose of these annotations is to be explanatory, but we all get what "Kaiju" represents here, right? Or do I need to say that it rhymes with "blimate range?"

of your first playthrough is gradually recognizing what the hell is going on, because the first levels have U.N. bunkers and lockdowns and brands taking advantage of dystopia — and then the later levels have monsters and combat, and actual fucking Evangelions, skyscraper-sized mechs walking around. It is, even just superficially, an extremely cool escalation. And with this greater understanding of global events, I initially assumed the tone was almost *On the Beach*-y, "it's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine." Because your friends are freakin CHILLIN, you know? *Umurangi* really traffics in punk aesthetics, cool hair and clothes, and kickass music, and maybe, I thought, part of the punk-ness was a perpetual state of apathy. Not even as a judgment, really. Just like *On the Beach*, that sense of wanting to spend their last days in a way that's comfortable. But I was wrong.

Because what *Umurangi* has, a thing I retroactively felt the absence of in our other examples, is palpable *disgust* with the world of before, anger at the injustice that fed into that red sky. Naphtali Faulkner, the game's director, has talked explicitly about the inspirations for this game. *Umurangi*'s red skies were borne from the red skies of Australia during the bushfires of late 2019 and early 2020, an inferno that burnt 94,000 square miles, killed dozens of people and a billion animals. And like the game's kaiju, it's easy to think of those bushfires as an unfortunate but unavoidable calamity. No one could have stopped Australia from burning, the radiation from poisoning the atmosphere, the changing of the seasons, the emergence of the kaiju. It's a convenient platitude, makes us feel okay. It's a lie.

The villains of *Umurangi Generation* aren't the enormous jellyfish monsters stomping around the environment, just as the villain of the Australian bushfires isn't the chemical reaction that causes plants to burn. Instead, both fictional and real-life disasters are the fault of leaders and oligarchs that *ushered in the disaster*, an apocalypse labeled "uncontrollable" only after years of ignoring the very clear **steps to control it.**[11]

A RESPONSIBILITY TO AVOID DESPAIR

This essay runs into a central conflict in my own motivations for writing. As a guy with a lot of anxiety, my initial impulse is to swerve into the doom and gloom. If I wrote a version of this for myself alone, it would probably have focused on the challenge of creating and appreciating beauty before the world inevitably does explode. But when writing for an audience of this size, I feel irresponsible just trauma-dumping on my audience. I needed to inject hope into this essay because there's no point in simply telling a million people that I think the world will explode.

Moreover, and more importantly, I can recognize that my deepest anxieties *don't actually provide an accurate picture of the situation*. I'm not censoring myself writing for a large audience; the responsibility of speaking to that many people actually motivates me to write past my own feeling of destruction. My point is, it's good for my writing to know you're reading this.

Now, I don't know the exact lore of *Umurangi Generation*. I don't know if, for instance, 45 years before the events of the game, corporations calculated that their own actions would cause the advent of…kaiju, and then did nothing. I don't know if the politicians of *Umurangi Generation* claimed that…kaiju were impossible until they were so unignorable that they shifted to saying the **mass death caused by…kaiju**[12] was part of God's plan. I *do* know that the wealthiest, the bourgeois of *Umurangi Generation,* shelter languorously in billion-dollar

cathedrals to denial, while the vulnerable are forced out under the red sky. And I know that even while the...kaiju set the world ablaze, the government spent untold billions siccing its dogs on the people demanding action. The last level of the game isn't destruction by a kaiju, it's being concussed by a cop while the world outside burns.

It's also here that the game's themes of indigeneity are most pointed. Faulkner has talked about how the game's entire design ethos stems from a school of thought pioneered by an Australian professor of indigenous knowledge. In the game, places are labeled with their Maori names, graffiti of traditional iconography covers the walls, a trio of NPCs perform a Haka at a protest. But it's hard not to also feel themes of native identity in the constant sense of injustice, in the fact that the new government will beat you while letting the Earth they stole die. There is no apathy here. Meditative calm at the end of the world is a mind trick that preserves the status quo. *Umurangi* cares about the pre-apocalypse. *Umurangi* is PISSED.

It's a tough line to walk, I understand. To have the characters rant about nuclear proliferation in *On the Beach* would have felt artificial; their consequences were foregone. And although the text of the novel doesn't explicitly say "This is why we should get rid of nukes," you don't have to dig *too* far in Shute's story to find that message. I'm reminded of the 1980 arcade classic *Missile Command*. Developed

EVERYONE THINKS THE WORLD IS ENDING

While writing this, I thought about the subjects of the "Up" documentary series, which followed a number of people from childhood through their ongoing adulthood (I touched on this series in my 2021 essay "The Game That Won't Let You See All of It"). The most interesting documented years were when the subjects were 28; almost all of them felt that the world was on the verge of ending (which, for them, was in the '80s). I also wrote this essay when I was 28. It's a peculiar feeling — on one hand, here's evidence that sensing "the oncoming apocalypse" is a repeated generational trend, no matter the time period. On the other hand, everything I read about the climate confirms that we are really, truly, on the brink and need to take immediate drastic action. But I do draw some comfort from watching the Up series and remembering that the world did not, in fact, end when they predicted. Those kids from the documentary made it. Maybe we can too.

at — stop me if you've heard this one — the height of the Cold War, a time when the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had a total of FIFTY THOUSAND nuclear bombs, *Missile Command* is essentially the prequel to *On the Beach*. A game set just pre-apocalypse, where missiles fall down in an endless rain and your task is to shoot them out of the sky, a game where the only conclusion is the destruction of every city you're supposed to protect, the only conclusion is failure. Dave Theurer, the creator of the game, was overwhelmed by this concept. Any sound of a plane in the distance became the initial blastwave of an atomic bomb. When he closed his eyes, he saw San Francisco annihilated.[13]

Theurer was not delusional. He was living in the pre-apocalypse. The fact that this pre-apocalypse was averted does not make his nightmares irrational.

Post-apocalypse is easy. When the great defining event of the world is in the rearview mirror, characters in post-apocalyptic stories are free to grapple with smaller, more individual crises. What are they going to do? Unexplode the bombs? Un-scorch the Earth?

Setting a story in the pre-apocalypse presents characters with similarly impossible challenges, but this time the stakes are so high that to NOT do anything would be...morally contemptible? Right? Clive has a moral obligation to stop Zettaflare, doesn't he? When the alternative is a burned world?

Paul Schrader's 2017 film *First Reformed* imagines a world on the brink of a mass extinction event, one brought on by a cabal of depraved oil executives, enabled by both state legislation and state violence. When the protagonist, a pastor, realizes that some of those executives will gather together in his church, it's impossible for him to escape the idea that it's maybe his ethical duty, maybe the ONLY reasonable choice, to- [14]

Andreas Malm's 2021 book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* is a non-fictional book of political theory[15] that was adapted into Daniel Goldhaber's 2022 fictional film of the same name. The book is not "instructional" in the chemical sense its title implies; rather it imagines a world that has seen protests of tens, thousands, millions of people against the pre-apocalypse, and yet "the wheels roll as fast as ever." "We are still here," Malm writes:

"We march, we block, we stage theaters, we hand over lists of demands to ministers, we chain ourselves, we march the next day

---

13

The history of *Missile Command*, chronicled in Alex Rubens' book *8-Bit Apocalypse*, has occupied part of my brain since I first read about it in 2018. I'm glad that this essay finally gave me a place to put that knowledge. If you see *Missile Command* used as b-roll in any of my other videos, just know I'm still thinking about Theurer's apocalyptic visions.

14

I have a special affection for deeply angry art (at least, if I'm also angry at the art's target). This segment of the essay, particularly with the video's inclusion of Ethan Hawke screaming into his hands, is meant to kind of break the pseudo-intellectual format of my writing. I give up some emotional range by so rigorously scripting and editing my videos. Cutting to Hawke's scream in *First Reformed* illustrates a point about the character I'm trying to make, but also reveals the emotional undertone of this whole section: a desperate, stifled outburst of anger.

15

When I went into my local bookstore and asked if they had a copy of this, an employee laughed and said they probably sell one every day. This is...good news, I think.

too. We are still perfectly, immaculately peaceful. There are more of us now, by orders of magnitude. There is another pitch of desperation in our voices; we talk of extinction and no future. And still business continues very much as usual. At what point do we escalate? When do we conclude that the time has come to also try something different? **When do we start-"**[16]

The film captures a number of people from different states and backgrounds, all already scarred by the pre-apocalypse, all brought together by the unignorable moral demand to-

They do not blow up *the* pipeline, the world's pipeline, the global network of all fossil fuel. They do not, in a single act, save the world. They do not cast the climate disaster into the same category of almost-annihilations as the Cold War. But they do not politely wait for that pre-apocalypse to become post, either.

It's not hard to find connections between the two stories. But *First Reformed* is a story about despair. It is a story about the ideated destruction of self, the fantasy of a Christ-like rescue of the world through death and suffering. Its despair is seductive, relatable, selfish. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, both the fiction and non-fiction, are instead about anger and about hope. Its focus is not on pain or imminent death but process, about the reasons to not lay down and let the tide swallow us whole. This is also the focus, I should add, of a truly beautiful YouTube video released last month by Sophie From Mars, titled "The World is Not Ending."

I find it so easy to think poetically of the world as one giant beach, one in which all of us stand and wait for the clouds of radiation to roll in. I wander through the world, attempting to capture what feels valuable, trying to record the things I hope to pass on. **All the art I create is, in one way or another, art about the pre-apocalypse.**[17] I look into the future and one fate seems so much likelier than all others. And yet, as Malm writes, "to act politically is to reject probability assessment as a ground for action." To resign ourselves to the disaster on the horizon, just because that's the direction inertia carries us, is an act of monumental apathy. "It is...easier, at least for some, to imagine learning to die than learning to fight." We will not be the Umurangi Generation, literally, because there is already a generation that is coming after us, and our choice — as is the choice of every generation — is whether to make the world contain "more or less suffering."

This is the great trial of being alive right now. It is necessary for all of us to view ourselves, accurately, in the pre-apocalypse. And yet, because of this, it is also absolutely vital to imagine, and work, and dream, of a world that is different.

16

Once again, my scripted words take a backseat to the raw emotion of visuals and sound: in this case, witnessing a pipeline blow the fuck up.

17

This line is the reason I included this essay in this book — I don't know how much it impacted anyone else, but writing it functioned as a real admission to myself. When I say "all the art I create is, in one way or another, art about the pre-apocalypse," I don't mean that all my essays about goofy games are secretly discussing the end of the world. I mean that the pre-apocalypse is the base color of every canvas I paint. Whether I let that base color show or cover it completely, I take its presence as a given. Even this book is, in one way or another, about the pre-apocalypse. I am attempting to scrapbook my own memories, an individualized version of Estelle capturing the feeling of her world in *Season*.

THERE WILL BE NO OTHER END OF THE WORLD

By Bijan Stephen

As I write this, to you now, the Supreme Court of the United States of America has made a judgment in secret that it is now unveiling to the public — after much deliberation, we're assured, from the smartest and most politically expedient minds in the American judicial system. Here it comes, unassailable.

BIJAN STEPHEN

(he/him)

Bijan Stephen is a writer at Compulsion Games and a music critic at *The Nation*. Previously, he wrote for Valve Software, hosted and produced podcasts at Campside Media, and worked as a TV correspondent for *Vice*. His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker, The New York Times,* and many other places.

While we wait, let's talk a little about what it means to currently live, in the here and now. There is a distinct nihilism in the air, a sense that tragedy lurks in the wings, waiting for its moment to enter the stage for the final act. What's strange is that, from where I'm sitting, across the street from a cemetery, I can't tell whether I'm in the audience or on the stage. Whether I'm an actor or someone who's paying for the privilege of watching *action*, rising and falling. The play goes on regardless.

That's the dominant question, I think, of living in the pre-apocalypse, that terrible, inevitable caesura. I suppose the answer's different for everyone, and different again at different times. What's clear is that the action onstage is beginning its crescendo, and there doesn't appear to be much time left.

———

There's a play I love called *R.U.R.*, published in 1920 by the Czech writer Karel Čapek. The title stands for "Rossum's Universal Robots," and it's set at a factory that produces artificial humans from synthetic organic material (this was the work that introduced the word "robot" to the

"What's clear is that the action onstage is beginning its crescendo, and there doesn't appear to be much time left."

English language). Everybody in the play knows, of course, that they don't have wills of their own.

The action begins with Helena, the naive daughter of an industrialist, arriving on the island. She has grand plans: she wants to free the robots from bondage. Naturally, this heroic effort ends with her marrying the factory's general manager. A decade passes, and the robots have become invaluable to every industry in every land; Helena is still on the island. She meets a new, more human version of the robot — and, distraught, burns the secret formula used to make them. Then comes the revolt.

All the humans are killed, save one — Alquist, a builder. The robots spare him because, as the robot leader Radius says, "[h]e works with his hands like the Robots." And then: "You will work! You will build for us! You will serve us!" Radius declares. "Robots of the world — the power of man has fallen. A new world has arisen, the rule of the Robots, march."

What Radius and the other robots don't realize is that in this one act they've doomed themselves.

Years pass, and Alquist is the only human left on Earth. He's been put to work trying to recreate the secret formula; the robots have finally realized that without humans to produce them, they can't reproduce. They're wearing out, breaking down. Alquist, they realize, is their only hope: the one human left who was reasonably close to the process of production, the one man who might have a chance to rediscover the secret formula the human Helena burned.

To further Alquist's research, the leadership of the robots has allowed him to vivisect robots that haven't worn out yet. Ones that are alive. And so one day, he spies a couple — Primus and Helena. He's curious about their bond, and so he threatens to dissect them.

PRIMUS. Sir, take me. I am made on the same day as she is. Take my life, sir. (Step to ALQUIST.)

HELENA. No, no, you shall not.

ALQUIST. Wait, girl, wait. (To PRIMUS) Do you not wish to live, then?

PRIMUS. Not without her. I will not live without her.

ALQUIST. Very well, I will use you. Into the dissecting room with you.

HELENA. Primus. Primus. (She bursts into tears and moves R. ALQUIST stops her.)

ALQUIST. Child, child, you can weep. Tears. What is Primus to you? One Primus more or less in the world—what does it matter?

HELENA. I will go myself.

ALQUIST. Where? Into the dissecting room?

HELENA. (Crosses to R.) Yes. In there — to be cut. (PRIMUS stops her from going.) Let me pass, Primus, let me pass.

PRIMUS. You shall not go in there, Helena.

HELENA. If you go in there and I do not, I will kill myself.

PRIMUS. (To ALQUIST). I will not let you. Man you shall kill neither of us.

ALQUIST. Why?

PRIMUS. We — we — belong to each other.

ALQUIST. Go. (Exit PRIMUS and HELENA L.) Adam — Eve.

And this is the end of the play; it is a quiet apocalypse. Capek leaves it unclear whether or not these two robots might actually reproduce — might have actually become human in the way that the human Helena once wanted them to — but, of course, it's impossible to ignore the language of Genesis here. I find it poignant: Man finally gives way to his successor. The end of one race and the dawn of another.

"I return to the image often. The Earth overtaken by the things we created."

I return to the image often. The Earth overtaken by the things we created. We are passing away; our hands have built sturdier things than us.

But even here there's a fantasy of control. The characters in the play are tragic, but they earned their fates. Did we?

Living in the pre-apocalypse also means living with the decisions that other people have already made for you. The decision has come down, by the way. I can feel it already: a charge in the humid summer air. Is it a dare? Is it a warning? And how do you know until you've made a decision you can't take back? The feeling recurs.

———

And yet. The operating question, the driving one is simpler. Far less grand. It is: How do you live in the here and now? And it is of course individually answered. I see a lot of different strategies: drugs, vaping, racking up credit card debt on overseas travel. Making videos. Taking up stoicism. Mostly we go about our business as usual. Things aren't bad, or bad enough just yet.

And anyway it is the summer. Hotter than ever. But the future will remember it as beautifully bearable, one of the last you could plausibly survive unaided. In that future, the one we're making with our choices now, I can't imagine how the people alive then will perceive us. Won't they ask why?

Why didn't we do anything when we could — about the climate, about the unaccountable wealthy, about the homelessness and poverty, the notion that we don't owe anyone anything? Didn't we realize that Earth was the only home we'll ever have? That we're all trapped here together? That believing anything else was the propaganda doing its nasty work?

I am inarticulate when I think too hard about the future, mute in the face of what I can't see past. Later, in the aftermath of whatever is coming, those of us who are still around will have to explain it to the little ones: That we didn't do anything because we didn't believe the end was coming, or because we thought someone else might fix it, or because we were scared. They'll say this around a fire, underneath an unknowable sky. The natural world will cry out around us; the world burned to ash and then regrown anew.

———

In the present, the decision, the one that tried to make a president into a king. "With fear for our democracy, I dissent," said one of the judges, from the room they deliberated in. I have to imagine it is a room unlike mine, somewhere far away, not close enough to a cemetery to feel the weight of the dead. How will we remember her?

I should say: I saw her once in person, more than 15 years ago now. I was in an audience in an auditorium. Far away from the action. I didn't know then what I know now. I took a picture of her — it turned out blurry and grainy, which is how our phones took pictures back then. Her, small against the backdrop of a massive pipe organ.

I thought then that I was witnessing history. She had just been appointed to America's highest court; I remember the hope in the air. It was the watchword of those days. Everyone had some hope that things could change, could be different one day. We were excited because it felt like the long arc of history might be bent into the right shape by our hands. And then a great many things happened in spite of our hope.

I got older, for one thing, and realized that my end probably wouldn't coincide with the end of everything; that my subjectivity was timebound, and so was everyone else's. When you finally live to an age you thought you'd never see as yourself — one that appeared in the far-off future — you learn that you will die, someday, and that *someday* is the best outcome because it's not today. But I also learned that in the meantime I'd like to make the here and now a little better before the dark arrives for me.

And still, implacably, comes the apocalypse. The long slow end of our way of living. I think the great Polish poet Czesław Miłosz wrote the end better than anyone, in Warsaw in 1944 (another apocalypse, another rupture), captured in "A Song on the End of the World:"

```
On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned, as it always
should be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their
umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a
lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the
island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels'
trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a
prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.
```

No other end of the world will there be, no other end of the world will there be.
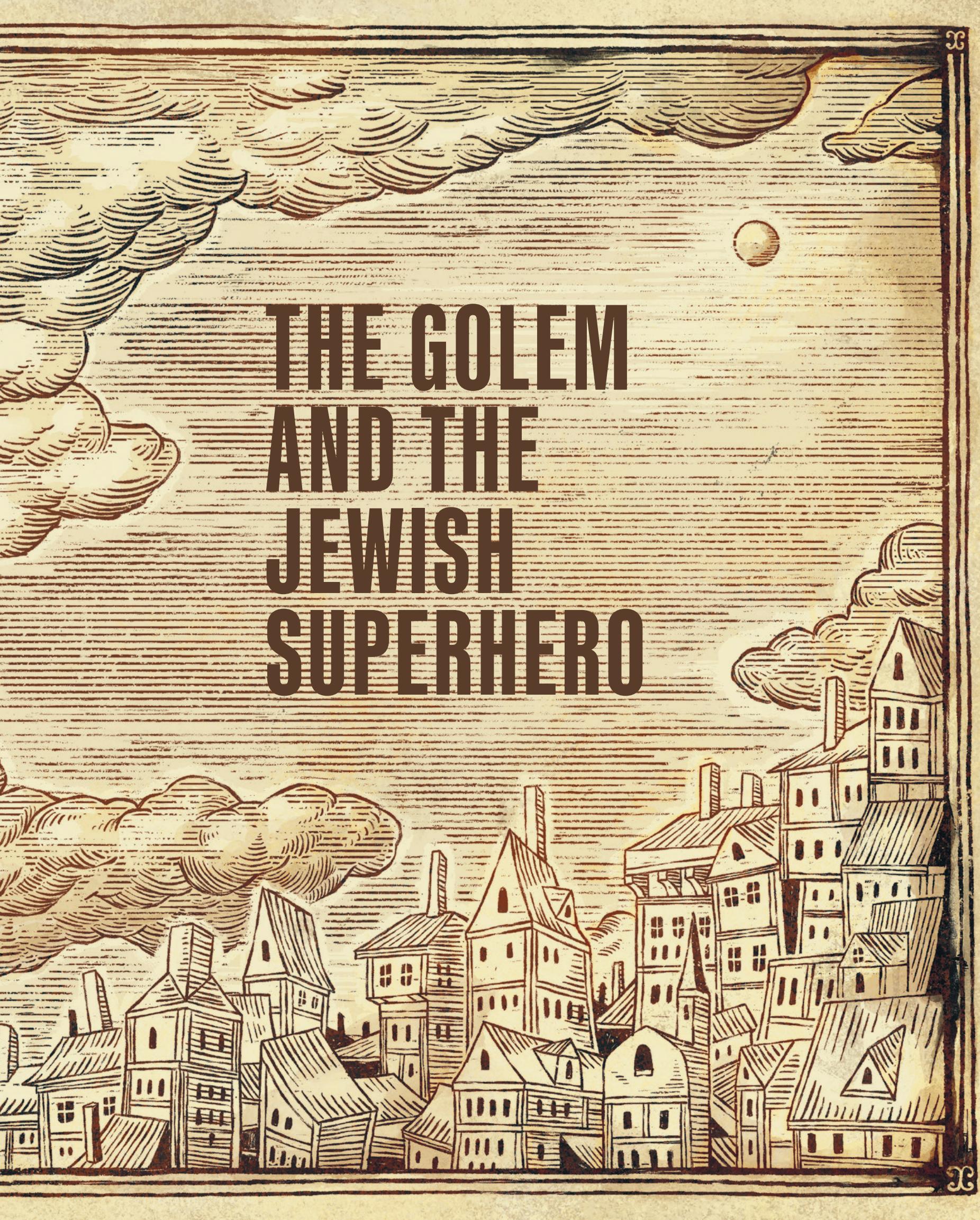
THE GOLEM
AND THE
JEWISH
SUPERHERO

THE GOLEM AND THE JEWISH SUPERHERO

He could have left us his Golem; he should have. What did he fear?

Elie Wiesel, 1983
"The Golem"

1

Wisniewski is also the author of another picture book I loved as a kid: *The Secret Knowledge of Grown-Up*s, a sort of faux-conspiracy book that recontextualizes common childhood annoyances as part of grand cover-ups by adults (e.g. all the milk in the country actually comes from a couple giant cows, and we have to keep drinking it to keep the cows from exploding). He described writing *Golem* as exhausting — I love that *The Secret Knowledge of Grown-Ups* was his pivot.

2

I went to a Jewish preschool and very much wanted to recreate that feeling of a classroom storytime here. If anything, I underplayed how rambunctious these storytimes could be: I have a strong memory of our classroom teacher telling our *preschool* class that "when Jews get drunk, they don't get angry, just sleepy." I have absolutely no idea why this came up in a storytime (but speaking personally, she was correct).

Okay, hi, hello, I have to get something out of the way right at the top. *Not this Gollum*. This ain't an essay about Smeagol. You can still make your "my precious" jokes in the comments, they're all very funny and good for engagement, but we're not talking Middle-earth here. Thank you.

Now. The Golem, spelled like that, is — well, it's a Jewish thing. Did you know that? To some of you, that'll be very obvious. To others, it might be the first you're hearing of it. The Golem is a piece of Jewish folklore! In some ways, it is a very specific myth; in others, it's quite loose, and now, in the 21st century, it's kind of everywhere. And all of this, the origin, its interpretations, its modern permutations, ties into what makes it such a fascinating cultural object.

But, I think we need to make sure we've all got, like, a base level of knowledge here. The Golem, as with many Jewish stories, is something I heard about as a kid. I probably got pieces of it as a bedtime story at some point, or maybe part of a joke, but I *know* the first complete telling of it I heard was from this book, **Daniel Wisniewski's *Golem*.**[1] And yes, this is a kid's book. It has big pictures. But I want to give you the same introduction I had to this myth, and also I think this book is good as *hell*. **So take a seat class, it's storytime.**[2]

Storytime

Okay, Daniel Wisniewski's *Golem*, written and illustrated by the man himself. Published in 1996, marked discard (whoops) but we will NOT be doing that. Before we start, one thing I want to point out is that this book uses *cut-paper* illustrations, which is a style I've really never seen used in a book like this, and makes it just unbelievably striking. It's probably the reason I have such vivid memories of it after so many years. Don't worry, I'll make sure everyone gets a chance to see the pictures.

So we open in Prague, in 1580. As we'll get to later, Prague in 1580 is not the *first* incidence of the idea of a Golem, but it is where virtually everyone puts the big Golem story. The first line of the book is: "Within the beautiful city of Prague, fierce hatreds have raged for a thousand years." Prague, then, was a city with a sizable Jewish population and a Jewish quarter, including, as Wisniewski writes here, a walled ghetto. We're still on the first page when he says one of the most important parts of the story, here.

"The Jews of Prague were bearing the ignorant fury of others. Enemies had accused them of mixing the blood of Christian children with the flour and water of matzoh."

He calls this the "blood lie," it's also frequently referred to as blood libel, it's basically the myth that Jews would kidnap and ritually sacrifice Christian kids. The blood libels were a real thing! They're a historical event! Were they happening in 1580? *Ehhhh*. But I digress. The Jews in the story are straight up not having a good time.

On the next page, we meet the major player for the Golem Story, Rabbi Loew. Rabbi Loew is a real dude, who was the chief Rabbi of Prague around this time. In the book, he knows that bad vibes are on the horizon for the Jews, and he's not sure what to do about it. Then, he falls asleep and has a vision of a divinely written word, GOLEM. Gimel, Lamed, Mem. He actually already knows what a Golem is, because he's a Rabbi and they're supposed to know such things.

"Golem was a giant of living clay, animated by Kabbalah, mystical teachings of untold power."

Kabbalah is Jewish mysticism. You might have heard about celebrities doing Kabbalah stuff, it's got a weird place in the current day — **honestly it was weird back then too.**[3] You just heard me say, "Man of living clay," things are a little kooky. Personally, I'd like to think that Madonna started doing Kabbalah specifically because of how into the Golem she was, but that's probably optimistic.

When I read this essay now, I'm surprised at just how many "jokes" I felt the need to throw in. I think I wanted to indicate that I wasn't taking the story too seriously, because I didn't want viewers to think I believed all this Golem stuff was literally true. In hindsight, I think they make sections of this video feel insecure. I don't think I'm particularly good at writing jokes within essays — many of these asides feel like nothing more than added words.

5

I've since learned that this idea has already been somewhat explored, in Terry Pratchett's 1996 novel *Feet of Clay* in which a detective investigates a series of unpredictable Golems. This is *close* but still doesn't fulfill my dream of a Golem-as-Columbo.

6

Many commenters on this video said they expected me to come back to this concept of blood libel in the form of modern-day conspiracy theories (most notably, QAnon beliefs that elite "globalists" [Jews] are trafficking countless children, harvesting the adrenochrome from the kids' blood to preserve their own youth and health). To tell you the truth, the idea didn't even occur to me — I was so deep in Golem lore that I didn't think of the connections to our modern-day blood libel.

This piece would have been very different if I had included a section on modern-day blood libel. Modern conspiracies are so complex in their stupidity that I worry it would have taken over a huge section of my essay, words I'd rather devote to the many different manifestations of Jewish art. But those commenters weren't wrong about the connections; "they're stealing our children" is one of the most prevalent themes in the world of conspiracies.

Anyway, Rabbi Loew realizes that this drastic step, creating a Golem, is necessary, and so he and some helpers go to the banks of a river under the cover of night. They get a bunch of clay and he shapes it into a giant man-shaped lump.

And then, as you can see from the illustration, stuff gets wild. Rabbi Loew essentially animates this clay, brings it to…life-ish. The story mentioned earlier that this is like, a high-level technique. Most people can't bring clay to life, but **Rabbi Loew is a level 100 boss**[4] so he does it without too much trouble.

The lightning subsides and whammo, there's the Golem, "complete and perfect," in the words of the book. He's a big ol' dude. An important part of the story happens here — the thing that actually wakes the Golem is the Rabbi carving the word "Emet" in his forehead, Alef, Mem, Tav, which means *truth*. Then the Golem wakes up.

An unusual twist for this story, the one Wisniewski has written, is that the Golem speaks — almost always, it's a mute giant. But in this one, he says, "Father, was this wise to do?", which were incidentally also my first words. The Rabbi is like, "We'll find out!", and they give him something to wear, and everyone heads back to chill at the synagogue.

They get back, and the Rabbi is like, "Here's the deal — you're here to protect the Jews, and the ways you're gonna do that is to catch the people doing the blood libel." This has always struck me as one of the most unusual parts of the story because the Golem is basically tasked to be a…detective? Like, he's big and usually not written to be a genius, but he's not *killin'* anyone, he's not a violent vigilante, he's actually just really good at solving the blood libels. The Rabbi wants him to go and find the actual culprit whenever someone says that Jews have sacrificed someone. And he's good at it! He tracks these murderers down and, like, turns them in to be arrested. I'm just sayin', Gumshoe Golem. Private Clay Eye. **Free ideas here.**[5]

So the Golem does detective work, and he also just helps out around the Ghetto. I picture him, like, sweeping and carrying big piles of books and stuff. The Wisniewski story gives him a real childlike innocence — he stops to watch the sunrise, gets distracted by birds, etc. This isn't present in every Golem story, but I really like it — it kinda gives him an Iron Giant vibe. Honestly, the Iron Giant has a real Golem vibe, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

The Golem is so good at his detective work that the "enemies of the Jews" get enraged because everyday people are **learning that Jews actually don't use their blood to make matzoh,**[6] these are just murders being pinned on an undeserving group of people. And those enemies of the Jews get SO mad that they riot, and start rushing the Ghetto. Rabbi Loew tells the Golem to come help protect the Jews, and another interesting twist Wisniewski throws in here is that the Golem seems to be getting taller, getting bigger.

The Golem goes to the gates of the Ghetto and holds them for as long as he can, but the mob eventually breaks them down using a battering ram. They start rushing into the Jewish Quarter, and that's when...

The Golem really goes sicko mode, starts sweeping aside people, breaks the battering ram in half, really becomes a violent protector rather than the quiet detective he had been before. Rabbi Loew is distraught, he didn't want this kind of violence. Eventually, the rioters run away, the Golem puts the gate back on its hinges, and they head back to the synagogue.

The next day, Rabbi Loew goes to the emperor. The emperor's like, "Okay, are you gonna kill us all with your giant clay man?" and the Rabbi is like, "No, he's just for protection! We just want to be safe." The emperor then says that he'll "guarantee the safety of your people." This is actually pretty similar to the Purim story if anyone's familiar, where a non-Jewish monarch is like, "Aight, I guess we'll protect you under the law now."

Rabbi Loew says, "Great, I'll deactivate the Golem, but JUST SO YOU KNOW, if things get bad, he'll come back again, and he'll be even stronger."

We return to the Jewish quarter, and the Golem actually knows what's about to happen, and is pretty distraught about it. He says, "Father, will I remember this?" This is also unusual among versions of this story; the Golem's agency isn't usually so highlighted. Rabbi Loew says, "No. You will be clay."

And then, the piece de resistance, the cherry on top of the whole Golem story, the Rabbi reaches out and erases the Aleph from the Golem's head, so it doesn't read "Emet" or Truth anymore, it reads "Met." Death.

At the end of the story, Rabbi Loew and his helpers place Golem in the attic of the synagogue and cover him in books.

```
"Though Golem had not truly been a man, they recited Kaddish,
the prayer for the dead. Then they left, locking the door behind
them forever. Since then, Golem has slept the dreamless sleep of
clay. But many say he could awaken. Perhaps, when the desperate
need for justice is united with holy purpose, Golem will come to
life once more."
```

THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

This essay has been challenging for me to return to in context of Israel's recent (at the time of writing, ongoing) annihilation of Gaza. Israeli leaders and politicians abroad have consistently invoked Judaism and Jewish historical traumas to justify Israel's slaughter of tens of thousands of Palestinians. I'm distressed at the effect of this warmongering rhetoric on me — despite the incredible efforts of pro-Palestinian Jewish activists across the globe, Israel's violence continues to alienate me from from my own sense of Judaism.

And in the middle of this, the Golem: an invincible superman that, in many tellings, demonstrates his ability to wreak incredible violence on the enemies of the Jews. How do I find my way back to my love of the Golem story after this? Through the inherently Jewish act of wrestling with the text, I suppose. Even in Wisniewski's telling, the violence of the Golem is a tragic perversion of the creature's original promise. I need to believe I can find beauty in the Golem again in the future, see its promise of Emet, of Truth, in my own Jewish pursuit of justice.

Reading David Wisniewski's *Golem* and making sure everyone can see the pictures

7

This line of thinking opens up a number of interesting connections. If interiority is what separates humanity from Golems, then stories could blur the line between humans and Golems. In *Dark Souls*, characters refer to the concept of "going hollow" — that is, losing all internal drive and becoming a soulless husk of themselves. Are they, in some sense, turning into a Golem? You could also maybe think of soldiers mindlessly following orders as Golems, animated only by the directions delivered to them. My point is, it's a flexible concept!

That concludes our storytime. Now, I think we have some birthdays today. Ari, Miriam? Come and get your tootsie pops. Yom Holedet Sameach, yom Holedet Sameach...

History Class

Prague in 1580 is the story in which the Golem rises to cultural prominence, but it's not the first incidence of the concept. That would be, actually, Adam. Like, *the first guy*, Adam. There are lines in the *Book of Psalms* that refer to Adam as an undeveloped substance, kinda like clay, and there's also this notion of the "body without a soul." That is, when Adam was just a body created by God, he was without any kind of interiority, **he was a Golem!**[7]

This is a really important throughline in talking about these myths because it underscores what the Golem represents. It is a creation of life, creating a living object in one's own image, which is, you know, what God does. This is a myth that kinda blurs the line between human and divine creation, and I think it's why so many of these stories underscore the Golem as being *imperfect*. You don't wanna get *too close*.

By the way, virtually all of this is coming from this book, *The Golem Redux* by Elizabeth Baer. It's very good and you should check it out.

As time goes on, more scholars write about this topic, and even this is really muddled in terms of how literal any of it was supposed to be taken (*the story of religion!*). For instance, there's this book, *Sefer Yetzirah*, the book of creation, that

was maybe written as just a speculative work but was then referred to as **literal instructions on how to make life.**[8]

One of my favorite aspects of the story is how language ties into the process. We got a little of that with the Emet/Met, Life-to-Death thing of the Wisniewski story, but this is actually even more important in other versions. There's this concept of the true name of God, that it's really powerful and unknowable. But, back in the day, some Rabbis would know some of it or all of it, and they would put that name in the Golem's mouth, and that's what would bring it to life.

When talking about this sort of thing, it's easy to get bogged down in rules. What kind of writing goes on the Golem? Who can make it, what does it require? But I think the minutiae moves us away from what makes it *interesting*. Why is this a story that exists, and has persisted? Let's get back to Prague.

So here's the thing — 1580 may have been the time the story was set, but that's not actually when people started talking about it. Jews in 16th century Prague weren't like, "Wow, crazy that our Rabbi has a clay man walkin' around, right?". It actually wasn't until the 1840s that stories were written linking Rabbi Loew and the Prague Synagogue with the Golem, and not until 1909 that the "canonical" Golem story we know today emerged. The book was called *The Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague With the Golem*, written by a guy named Yudl Rosenberg.

That's more than 300 years removed from the time period he was writing about! What was the motivation? Well, here's one: I mentioned during storytime that the idea of blood libels happening under Rabbi Loew's watch, during the 1580s, was a little shaky. There actually isn't *any* evidence of those types of crimes during that timespan — the 1500s were almost a golden period for Jews in Prague. In the 1300s, there were riots in which the Jewish quarter was burned and looted and thousands of Jews were killed. Jews were actually made to wear yellow badges. Compared to that, the 1500s were pretty chill.

Here's the thing though; starting just a couple decades before Rosenberg published his book in 1909, **accusations of blood libel started happening again.**[9] Huge, well-publicized trials in which state governments prosecuted Jews on basically the claims that they used Christian blood in rituals, all across Europe.

And so you can see why this particular story might resonate, a resurfaced myth made directly relevant to the plight that people were facing at that particular time. For Jews, the idea that "we've been through something like this before, we survived" is a pretty dang powerful one. Is it any wonder that the story of a Golem, a larger-than-life figure that protected Jews from angry mobs and false accusations, would provide a little comfort?

But that's just one version, just Yudl writing his little story at the turn of the century. That's just the *start* of all the places this story would go.

8
A large part of my appreciation of (Reform) Judaism stems from the fact that it doesn't require me to literally believe in its more mystical elements — most of its lessons work just fine with or without a belief in genuine "acts of God." When I write about religious beliefs, I'm not interested in convincing people to believe the same things I do. Instead, I want to interrogate religions' central metaphors with the same rigor I do with all other kinds of art. That interrogation is, predictably, where I find the most meaning.

9
Reconfiguring the idea of the past to help make sense of the present is a deeply interesting phenomenon. It's also a sneakily *dangerous* phenomenon, often used to paint over historical injustices or justify present-day abuses of power. Whether it's the lens of nostalgia through which we view the pop culture of our youth, the exaggerated brutality of a previous era (as I touch on in my 2023 essay on executions), or creating a fairytale about a great clay protector, the stories we tell ourselves about the past offer tremendous insight into the anxieties of the present. All the more reason to write about it.

The Golem In Art[10]

Given that the Golem story really only emerged in full in 1909, it's fairly remarkable how quickly adaptations of it, including adaptations by non-Jews, sprung forth. One of the most prominent of those was a German silent film called *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*, or *The Golem: How He Came Into This World*. This rather protracted title is because this movie was actually a PREQUEL to a 1915 German silent horror movie just called *The Golem*. Presumably, German audiences were like "How did he come into this world?!" In the same way we're like "Why is he named Han Solo?!" There was even another silent movie in this period called *The Golem and the Dancing Girl*, which, your guess is as good as mine, but both of those were destroyed and *How He Came Into This World* was the one we got. So let's talk about it.[11]

Der Golem was directed by Paul Wegener, and fits squarely into the German Expressionist period of silent film, along with titles like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which came out in the same year. I'll be honest, I don't like this movie! It is tremendously slow, and many of the main characters are just kind of grotesque and I think that's probably the point but it's just not quite for me.

Paul Wegener himself plays the Golem and certainly forms a striking silhouette. But he's also very much a movie monster — and honestly, also way too close to minstrel-ry for me to feel comfortable. The Rabbi in this story basically borrows the power of a demon to bring him to life, and he is just kinda a dumb brute, and at the end, he throws a guy off a roof. I don't think the movie is specifically anti-semitic, but I would also not say it's particularly flattering to Jews, and this was made in GERMANY in 1920, so that fact is kind of hard to ignore.[12]

However — the one place that I can praise this movie without reservation is the set design, done by a German architect named Hanz Poelzig. It is truly remarkable, a massive and three-dimensional version of the ghetto that's bending in on itself, almost like the Jewish quarter itself is buckling under the weight of oppression. I mean look at this thing! Tim Burton, eat your heart out. It's the one part of the movie that gives me the same feeling as my favorite expressionist art.

There's so much to like here; the way the fire consumes a room, the lighting in a basement, the truly unbelievable density of the crowd scenes. Poelzig's other major architectural contribution was a theater in Berlin called the *Grosses Schauspielhaus*, and I bring this up just to say, *look at it*. I have genuinely never seen a built space that looks like this. Towards the end of his career, Poelzig made plans to flee Germany. The Nazis called the expressionist theater "degenerate art" and covered the ceiling. They accused Poelzig of "cultural Bolshevism." He died in 1936. Where were we?[13]

I don't think it's an accident that the visual representations of the Golem are so enduring. The Golem itself is a sculpted object, a man made out of clay, and

---

10

This is one of my only essays that's divided into chapters. I included them in part because I feared the essay would feel directionless without them — this is largely a general exploration of the Golem and I only spell out my specific argument about the myth at the end. I tend to dislike chapters in my essays because they often create hard separations between topics instead of demonstrating how connected everything is. They don't *hurt* this essay, but I think a few segues would have made them unnecessary.

11

A detail I missed here is that *Der Golem* was a *smash hit* in the U.S. It played for 16 continuous weeks in New York's Criterion Theater, and inspired a small-scale "Golem cult" within the culture. America had Golem fever!

12

One unignorable aspect of *Der Golem's* place in history is that Paul Wegener, its director and star, would go on to perform in several Nazi propaganda films and theater pieces. Whether or not he was an enthusiastic participant is up for debate; his son later wrote that Wegener was "highly critical of the Hitler regime." But the fact remains that Wegener, a non-Jew who became iconic through his depiction of a mythical Jewish protector, helped create art for the architects of the Holocaust.

13

"Where were we," a little acknowledgement of the digression, is meant to mirror the course of many conversations on early 20th century Jewish art — the discussion of the art itself is inevitably sidetracked by the tragedy that befell the artist. Not only were we robbed of that artist's future, we were robbed of the ability to talk about their work outside the shadow of Nazism.

as such, the story seems to pull incredible visual representations out of people. There are Poelzig's sets, Wisniewski's cut-paper illustrations, clay models just like this. Another version of the story with a beautiful visual language is *The Golem* by Elie Wiesel, illustrated by Mark Podwal. In Podwal's art, the Hebrew alphabet rises out of the streets and objects of Prague. The resonance with the story is clear; just as the Golem is animated by the powerful words of Rabbi Loew, so too does the entire Jewish quarter exist because of the power of language. Judaism is a culture built on study, examination, argument. The Golem may be the most literal manifestation of the power of these words, but Podwal's illustrations imply that everything built is, in some way, fueled by this same power.

Wiesel's story is kind of a meta-meditation itself, told generations removed from the actual events. It begins:

"I owe this legend to an old beggar named Shmaike ... he would tell only one story – always the same story – which he allegedly inherited from his uncle ... this uncle had been told the story by his maternal grandfather, Rebbe Issachar, who attributed it to his master, the famous Rebbe Ephraim ... Rebbe Ephraim had heard the tale from a **gravedigger, Reuven, son of Yaakov,**[14] who claimed to have witnessed the numerous miracles that legend attributes to the Golem..."

Right off the bat, we're presented with the story as completely distant from its point of origin, passed through the years, as Jewish stories are. The anachronisms like the blood libel make complete sense in Wiesel's telling; of course, somewhere along the chain, someone would have modified the story to coincide with whatever

14

Fun fact: Yaakov is the Hebrew name for "Jacob," meaning that Jacob was the one in Wiesel's story who claimed to have witnessed the Golem. I'm thrilled to be included.

A page from Elie Wiesel's *Golem*, illustrated by Mark Podwal

15

I would have loved to further explore Chiang's story. In it, a character posits that "lexical order induces thermodynamic order" — that thoughtfully created words literally decrease entropy. Furthermore, the main characters hope those thoughtfully created words can make up for an oncoming falloff in human virility, literally replacing traditional reproduction with a sort of Golem-themed IVF. The story also includes a Kabbalist, a discussion on if all of humanity is just God's Golem, and sperm made of thousands of tiny, human-shaped homunculi. It's an absolutely wacky tale and I adore it.

the Jews were currently up against. It also makes certain lines in this version all the more wrenching — if you know who Wiesel is, you probably have some idea — but we're not quite there yet.

Other interpretations of the Golem are quite infatuated with this idea of language. Possibly the greatest living sci-fi author, Ted Chiang, has a short story called "Seventy-Two Letters" that dives into an immensely complex, uhh, Golem-industrial world, in which Golems are animated to do all sorts of things by different permutations of commands given to them using an almost scientific formula derived from an object's "true name."[15]

Chiang casually drops lines like "current thinking held there was a lexical universe as well as a physical one, and bringing an object together with a compatible name caused the latent potentialities," and it is all very heady stuff, but it ultimately centers on, again, the power of language. The story ends with the epiphany that language imprints on us as much as on any Golem, that it is, in fact, necessary for our own reproduction. Although scientific when compared to Wiesel's traditional, the theme of words carrying through time remains the same.

Finally, honorary king of this channel Jorge Luis Borges has a poem called "El Golem," in which he, too, ponders this power. He starts the poem by ruminating

on the power of names, and humanity's vain quest to understand the power that lies within them. In the poem, Rabbi Loew, shuffling letters endlessly, stumbles upon the one true name, speaks it, and animates the Golem. But the Golem is imperfect, flawed, tragic, and Loew is overcome with guilt. Ultimately, Borges draws the final connection between the failure of Loew and that of God **(also, this poem was originally in Spanish, so this translation, like the Golem, is imperfect).**[16]

```
The Rabbi observed it with tenderness
and with some horror. "How" (he asked)
"could I beget this sorry son
and abandon inaction, wherein sanity lies?"

"Why did I add to the infinite
series another symbol? Why to the vain
skein that winds in the eternal
did I give another cause, another effect, and grief?"
In the hour of anguish and lack of light,
his eyes on his Golem would rest.
Who will tell us the things God felt
when looking at his Rabbi in Prague?
```

THE GOLEM, HEROIC

In 1938, two Jewish kids from Cleveland created a nigh-invincible protector, quite literally put words in his mouth, and sent him out into the world. They called him Kal-El. Or, Superman. (That was pretty clever, huh?)

It's kind of remarkable how much of superheroes as we know them were created by Jewish artists. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster create Superman. Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Bill Finger and Bob Kane, Will Eisner, Gene Colan, would you like me to keep going?

There is the simple statement that these were Jewish-American artists creating heroes to beat the shit out of Nazis — which is true! But I can't ignore the fact that so many characters, especially the incredibly strong, nigh-invincible ones, feel so Golem-esque. I mean, Superman exists *as a protector*. He doesn't have "truth" written on his forehead, but he might as well.

There have been more literal examples — there was a short-lived character called The Golem that was more or less the myth we know, but purple. There are a couple higher-brow graphic novels, ***Kavalier and Clay***[17] and *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, that are *very* explicitly Jewish and dissecting the Golem's legacy. There's our old friend Ben Grimm, aka The Thing, who is *extremely* Jewish, **like the MOST Jewish,**[18] and buddy, he's a big thing made of rocks that clobbers people, *that's the Golem.*

16

Borges' poem is much longer than what I quote here, much of it regarding the Rabbi's pursuit of God within language. Chiang and Borges' shared intrigue with the Golem makes a lot of sense — both authors are fascinated by the intersection of science and religion, and their depictions skip the "historical protector" element of the story to instead focus on the infinitely powerful world of linguistics.

17

Obligatory correction: *Kavalier and Clay* is not a graphic novel, it's a regular novel about the comic industry. See how committed I am to reprinting these essays in their original form? Even the mistakes stay in!

18

As a kid, finding a reference to Judaism in anything that wasn't specifically sold as "Jewish media" was an electrifying experience — Like seeing a menorah in the background of a comic panel, or the classic *Rugrats* Passover special. In the Disney movie *Lilo & Stitch*, Stitch says "Chanukah" for some reason and I just about lost my mind.

19

This dive into a thoughtful episode of the *X-Files* just barely beat out an exploration of a segment in *The Simpsons'* Treehouse of Horror XVII in which Bart animates a Golem (who looks exactly like Wegener's depiction) and uses it to pull various pranks. Lisa and Marge then create a lady-Golem out of Play-Doh and the two Golems get married. It's not a stellar Treehouse of Horror bit, but there's plenty of solid Jewish humor and the Golems are played by Richard Lewis and Fran Drescher, so it still gets a solid 7/10 from me.

20

There's actually a whole paper about this by Stephen Bertman, who attempts to find various tellings of the Golem myth that could have fallen into Shelley's possession. The paper reads like a literary game of "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," identifying friends of Shelley's family who studied in Germany and *may have* run across tellings of the Golem that they then *may have* recounted to Shelley. A fun exercise, but not something I'd put a lot of weight on.

21

I'm not a *Pokémon* guy, but I've learned that while the Pokémon named "Golem" doesn't resemble a Golem, another Pokémon — "Golurk" — is explicitly Golem-esque. The British artist James Turner originally drew Golurk, and *Pokémon* art director Ken Sugimori said he liked it as a ghost-type Pokémon because "Japanese people are already familiar with Golems."

It kind of amazes me just how clear the allegory is. No, these figures are not sculpted from clay, and yes, they can speak and stuff. But you have these strong, benevolent creatures, fictional but often fighting real oppression, brought to life with art and animated with the power of language, I mean *come on*.

Also, you know this scene in, like, every comic book? Here's a scene from *Der Golem* in 1920. He's been superhero-in for a while.

Golems, in our current world, are everywhere.

```
[Inglourious Basterds scene]
Hitler: The one they call 'The Bear Jew'...is a Golem!
Nazi Officer: No one really believes 'The Bear Jew' is a Golem.
Hitler: Why not?
```

I am not going to be able to hit every one, but to name a few:

There's an *X-Files* episode called "Kaddish"[19] that handles the Golem shockingly well — although there's a twist that the animated figure is sort of reanimated, he's taken the form of a woman's fiance who was killed:

```
Jewish Scholar: Three letters: Aleph, Mem, Tav, creates the word
"emet"
Mulder: It's fashioned from mud and then animated using mysical
incantations
Scully: Mud!?
```

The myth is told quite accurately and handled with respect. The Golem goes around and kills a bunch of Nazis — praxis — but ultimately the story is about the lingering trauma of the Holocaust, and how that loss can leave a person, or even a community, feeling like it's lost its soul. It's a *really* good episode of *The X-Files*.

Also, Scully doesn't even get to provide an alternate explanation in this! You know how in every episode she's like, "That wasn't aliens, it was just swamp gas" or whatever? She doesn't do that here! I guess she just believes in Golems!

Frankenstein is a pretty obvious analogue. There's some *circumstantial* evidence that Mary Shelley came into contact with the Golem myth before writing her book,[20] and at one point she refers to the monster being sculpted "from lifeless clay." But I would say the closer parallel would be their filmic adaptations — the silhouette of Wegener in *Der Golem* is immensely Frankenstein-esque, and both have fairly iconic scenes with little girls.

And then, moving into the fantasy world, "Golem" has really just come to mean "a robot in a non-sci-fi environment." *Final Fantasy* is full of Golems, *Dark Souls*, *Minecraft*, *Pokémon* has a Golem[21] (I don't think that one really counts).

Golems and comic book superheroes, both animated with the power of language

In video games, it's hard to escape the enormous *Shadow...of the Colossus*, a game that is packed to the brim with creatures made of stone and earth, brought to life through magic, protecting a land from a violent invader.

There are also many versions of the Golem story, or Golems in other media, that "lose control" at some point, go kinda wild, and have to be brought down. I have to say, I don't really love this beat. I mean, I get it, a point about the hubris of people to think they could create life like a God, but it really gets away from the story's original themes of protection. The one exception to this is something like *The Iron Giant*, as I mentioned earlier. The idea of a being capable of great violence, yet choosing to be gentle and a shield instead — that's the good stuff right there. Listen, I'm not saying this was intentional, but if you view *The Iron Giant* like a Golem story...hoo boy. It works.

The Golem has been appropriated into basically every corner of culture at this point, and I don't use that word judgmentally! I don't feel that the original story of the Golem is lessened because it's also a *Dark Souls* boss. There are, I'm sure, other Jews that feel differently. We're not a monolith — in fact, we're probably best at arguing with each other.

So What? Who Cares?

I've done...a lot of talking about a mythical creature in this video. And on one hand, maybe that's enough! It's fun to track influences through history, see the origins of our cultural tropes. But I dunno, I feel like there's more to this story than that. More to my fascination, more to the idea that's permeated through history.

WISNIEWSKI'S IDEAS, TRANSFORMED

David Wisniewski, author and illustrator of the picture book I read early in this essay, died in 2002 at only 49 years old. Five years prior, he won the Caldecott Medal for *Golem*. In his acceptance speech, he said: **"Though demanding, making words and pictures fit and flow within narrative harmony is enormously satisfying. Few other professions are as metaphysical. The thoughts and images of one mind are transformed into a solid object, which, when opened, conveys them to thousands of other minds. What a privilege! What an opportunity! What a responsibility."**

Transforming thoughts and images into a solid object — Wisniewski was making Golems all along.

22

Over the course of turning this essay into a video, I became obsessed with finding appropriate and "legitimate" music for its most emotional moments. The climactic song, which begins in this section and continues through the end, is a performance of the Mourner's Kaddish prayer originally composed by Maurice Ravel and performed by violinist Alexander Shonert. Ravel is one of history's great composers; Shonert is a Jewish virtuoso based in Prague, the home of the Golem. While writing this section, I listened to Shonert play Ravel's Kaddish over and over — for me, the music and the words are nearly inextricable from each other. I will always be grateful to Shonert for allowing me to use his performance in the video.

I mean, actually, I know what it is. I mentioned Elie Wiesel's version of the Golem story a while ago, one that I like very much. But there's another layer to his telling, because Elie Wiesel, you might know, was an immensely talented and prolific Jewish writer and he was also a Holocaust survivor. You might have read his book, *Night*, in school. Maybe.

And that history makes Wiesel's telling of the Golem story hit harder than virtually any other that I've read. This is true of all of Wiesel's writing — there are lines in this story that are simple and yet just tear me apart. There's one where he just says

```
"Father was always happy, or at least he seemed to be ... I
really loved my father,"
```

And that's, I mean that's nothing, that's just a line about a family, but if you've read *Night,* or just know Wiesel's history, you know how he was orphaned while in the death camps and it's just...

My point is that Wiesel's writing, explicitly or not, like so much Jewish art of the last 70 years, is unavoidably post-Holocaust. It's inescapable. And you don't have to stretch to find Wiesel's reflections on the Holocaust in his Golem story. He puts it in the first chapter. And he manages to sum up my own thoughts while writing these thousands of words, better than I ever could.[22]

```
"And we miss him [The Golem]. More than ever, we need his presence
and perhaps even his mystery. As usual, the year promises to be
one of punishment; I feel it in every bone of my body. I have
lived too many ordeals not to be able to predict what the future
has in store. Oh, of course I have faith in God: I would not be
a Jew if I did not have faith. But neither would I be a Jew if
I were not afraid ... I know that sometimes there are men who
choose death because they wish to escape this wretched earth,
which first bears us but then devours us.

Ah, if only the Golem were still among us ... I would sleep more
peacefully. Why did the Maharal take him from us? Did he really
believe that the era of suffering and injustice was a thing of
the past? That we no longer needed a protector, a shield? Tell
me please, our Maharal who knew everything, did he not know that
exile, after him, would become harder than before, even more
cruel? That the burden would become heavier, more bloody? He
could have left us his Golem; he should have. What did he fear?"
```

And what can we say to that? What purpose does the Golem story serve to Wiesel, or the millions of others that lived through a reality too hellish to imagine, the Jews and non-Jews who continue to live in that reality to this day?

And yet...it's Wiesel who wrote the book. He is the one continuing the legacy of the Golem, so clearly it serves some purpose to him, right?

The Golem is a story about many things, but at its most basic, it is a story about creating something, creating *art*, and then that art going on to protect you. It is a created object that was built to preserve the Jewish people.

And in that way, the hundreds of stories about different Golems aren't simply retellings of the "original" (a concept that barely exists). Instead, they are their own sculptures, continuing that legacy. Each one of them is a form of remembrance, and renewal, and preservation. They are Golems in themselves.

Art is not the only form of protection we need in the modern world. There is not a clay figure that will stride in to stop injustice, to protect refugees, to prevent state oppression. That's us. We gotta do that now. The Golem has always been an imperfect creation — that's baked into its existence. It isn't a replacement for... you know, us.

But the continued existence of art, of stories, is the continued existence of a people.[23] Elie Wiesel continues to tell the story of the Golem because the Nazis were unable to take that from him. And I am telling it to you now. And presumably, some of you will go home and say, "Hey, did you know the Golem is a Jewish thing?" So it is a form of protection. Quiet, maybe. But the Golem has never been a noisy figure. And it's our words, not its, that keep it alive.

23

It's helpful, especially when feeling down about my YouTube view counts or something, to think of my essays as Golems. Each stands in preservation of an aspect of myself, whether or not it was "successful" upon release. I put my words into it, and send it off into the world.

BUT REALLY, IS THE GOLEM A JEWISH THING?

By Andrew Geller

ANDREW GELLER
(he/him)

Andrew Geller is Jacob's dad. His previous publications are mostly in the scientific literature on color vision, environmental toxicology, and environmental justice. Andrew also plays bagpipes and chants Torah, though seldom at the same events.

I'm glad Jacob started this essay the way he did. We are a two-Golem (Gollum) family. The clay Golem that stood on the mantelpiece at Jacob's left shoulder during this video appeared in our home a couple years after he was born, a gift from my parents from their trip to Prague. I'm pretty sure that Jacob knew about Tolkien's creature before he knew about the Golem — we read The Lord of the Rings books together, and during one of the few times I was sick in bed, Jacob bought me a Blu-ray after seeing me watch a faded VCR version of *Fellowship of the Ring* over and over. One of the joys of parenthood is the reversal of roles; after feeding stories to Jacob as a child, he has returned the pleasure.

The Golem and Magic Realism

In the section of the video on the history of the Golem, Jacob describes its mystical animation. He says, "It is a creation of life, creating a living object in one's own image, which is, you know, what God does." As a father, I have to point out that this creation of life is also the essence of parenthood, and that the trepidations faced by Rabbi Loew are the trepidations shared by parents everywhere. As one of Jacob's religious school teachers told his mom and me, "My hope is that he will use his powers for good, rather than evil."

"My recollections of my mother's stories read like twisted fairy tales"

Jacob's fascination with multi-generational archetypes reflects the magic realism of stories from both sides of our family: the baby who flew through the windshield of a car to land safely in a cornfield, yards away from an otherwise fatal crash (as referenced in his early essay on *What Remains of Edith Finch*, "How Edith Finch Handles Death"), and his connection to the Holocaust.

Jacob and his sister Lena are third-generation Nazi Holocaust survivors. My mom, Jacob's grandma Stella, was born in Paris and lived there until her parents sent her to the country in 1942. There, in a small town south of the city, Stella survived the war with the help of the French underground, even as her parents, who were French citizens, were "deported" to die in Auschwitz. My recollections of my mother's stories read like twisted fairy tales or dream journals, replete with both magic and horror.

Stella went to live in a house with no plumbing, sharing the home with chickens, a cat, a woman, her husband, and the woman's lover, who had a big mustache. The cat ruled the home; if she went to sleep on the bed, the woman slept in a chair. Stella had to walk daily to a nearby castle to get water, passing by a giant crucifix that had an enormous beehive clinging to its back.

Near that well, Stella was once approached by a German soldier. He spoke to her in German, and then in Polish, the second language of Stella's home. Stella responded, but from that moment, lost the ability to speak Polish.

Stella plucked chickens and foraged for wild strawberries and mushrooms. She hated one of her foster homes — the man of the house was like an old oak tree who kept a whip hanging from a pole. Stella would collect poison mushrooms while out foraging in hopes of freeing herself.

Stella had light hair and green eyes; even at age 6, she understood she could "pass" as non-Jewish. She insisted on going to school; she tore the gold star from her clothing so that she wouldn't be visible as a Jew each day as she walked past "the collaborator's house." She changed her last name from Goldberg to Colbert, figuring

that if "Colbert" was good enough for a minister to Louis XIV, it was good enough for her.

At age 11, she got on a boat in Marseilles and sailed to America, alone. On arriving, her well-meaning but ill-advised relatives got rid of the few mementos Stella had preserved of her French family to "help her start a new life."

In her telling, Stella's world was as much magic realism as the world sketched in Alice Hoffman's 2019 novel *The World That We Knew*, detailing the remarkable creation of the female Golem, Ava. In Hoffman's story, Hanni Kohn, a Jewish mother, convinces Sarah, the brilliant daughter of a learned rabbi, to create a Golem to protect her daughter as World War II envelops Europe. This is a distinctly feminine take on the story: Sarah and Hanni craft and effectively give birth to Ava: "From now on they were partners in bringing forth life … The air in the room grew stifling, as it does before a birth." Ava is a gentle protector gifted with the languages of all peoples and animals and a deep love of nature, an animism that transcends a supernatural god, a form of spirituality Ava and Stella share. If only Stella had been granted such a protector!

In a way, she was, along with the rest of Europe, but much too late for her parents. My father, Sy, was part of the massive Golem created to free Europe from Nazi savagery, the U.S. Army. He served in General George S. Patton's army, and his stories, too, took on the flavor of magic realism — nights in foxholes so dark that one might be anywhere but a vast and frozen woods; a bewitched jeep that blocked the progress of the U.S. 3rd Army by defying the best efforts of an inexperienced city boy's attempts to push it into gear; a brush with the General himself and a distant photograph of Patton's legendary urination into the Rhine River.

Sy and Stella met after the war (in another fairy tale story to be told elsewhere) and built a home full of books and art — their own handcrafts in ceramics, photography, weaving, and macramé, as well as artwork from other cultures. I believe this fed Jacob's love for books and

Ceramic Golem from Prague (left); "Rosemary's Baby" created by Sy Geller (right)

art of all kinds. The ceramic Golem was very much in keeping with their aesthetic sense. My father had a finely tuned sense of the absurd combined with a drive to create; one of my favorite pieces of his is a deeply imperfect vase that Sy created and dubbed "Rosemary's Baby," our own Golem-on-the-Shelf.

Is the Golem a "Jewish thing?"

In the opening and closing of Jacob's essay, he tells us that the Golem is a "Jewish thing." It is absolutely a part of Jewish folklore. But how Jewish is it? Where would it fit in Jewish liturgy and practice? The Golem's a fighter. Let's consider a Jewish holiday with fighters: Hanukkah.

Our family has always enjoyed Hanukkah. In its modern telling, it is a holiday of benevolent miracles, oil that lasted for eight days, candles, spinning tops, potato latkes, and presents.

Quick quiz: If you want to find the story of Hanukkah in Jewish scripture, where do you look? Not in the *Torah*, not in the *Books of Maccabees*, not even the *Talmud.*[1] The book of the Bible that provides the backstory to Hanukkah is actually the *Book of Daniel*.

Daniel is set in the 6th century BCE, at the time of the capture and sacking of Jerusalem by Babylon, more than 400 years before the Maccabean revolt in 164 BCE. It is

an apocalyptic tale using the rich language and imagery of dream interpretation, prophecy, art, and fantastic events to talk about issues otherwise undiscussable at the time it was written.

While *Daniel* appears to be telling the story of the Persian kings, it actually describes the ascendance of Alexander the Great, the division of Alexander's empire after his death, and the battles between these Balkanized segments of the empire. The apocalyptic imagery describes the contemporaneous coming to power of Antiochus IV, who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and forbade Jewish study and practice.

Daniel is an example of using coded commentary — recognizing that when you are living in a land that is not your own or as a people who have only a tenuous foothold, it can be dangerous to speak openly about the ruling class. *Daniel* uses coded commentary to tell the story of the lead-up to the revolt and reflects the approach that diaspora Jews took to survive during apocalyptic times in Jewish history.

In the history class section of the essay, Jacob tells us that the story of the Golem placed contemporary 19th and 20th-century problems in a setting hundreds of years earlier. The Golem, too, uses coded commentary — it shifts time and place to hide its meaning from contemporary people in power. The very nature of the

---

1 *Maccabees* is part of the Christian bible. And Hanukkah is given only brief mention in the *Talmud*, the massive record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation.

Golem story is a "Jewish thing," paralleling strategies used in Jewish liturgy millennia before.

When we dig a little deeper into *Daniel* and Hanukkah, however, we see how the Golem, in invoking force of might, departs from Jewish tradition. Despite their heroic status in modern Hanukkah celebrations, the Maccabees broke sharply with Jewish values. They fought on the Sabbath, killed other Jews they deemed to be too assimilated, and exhorted men to die:

```
Far be it from us to do such a thing as to
flee from them.

If our time has come, let us die bravely for
our brethren,

and leave no cause to question our honor!
```

While the Jewish Bible is rife with tales of military conquest, and some of these stories extol valor, they do not glorify a heroic death. *Daniel* presents a very different response from the Maccabees — that of patience and God's ultimate justice.

```
The knowledgeable among the people will
make the many understand; and for a while
they shall fall by sword and flame, suffer
captivity and spoliation…

It will be a time of trouble, the like of
which has never been since the nation came
into being. At that time, your people will be
rescued…

And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the
bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the
many to righteousness will be like the stars
forever and ever.
```

Daniel counsels that the key to survival in the diaspora is to maintain your Jewish identity and your Jewish ethics and serve the rulers with fidelity and grace. When this fails, put your will in God. The key to survival is not to die gloriously in battle but to live to survive (and out-survive) the cycle of kingdoms that come and go. *Daniel*'s writers sought to demonstrate that their defeated communities could survive as a people after the loss of statehood and pushed forward a strategy of being fruitful and multiplying and supporting family and community.

This is not the praxis of the Golem, the superhero who reluctantly but aggressively assures survival. It is, rather, a deep faith in the march of history.

This view has some currency even in post-Holocaust times. When Rabbi Leo Baeck was sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, he was already a parent and an established leader of the German Jewish community. He knew the awesome adult responsibilities of protecting his family and his people. In his writings from Theresienstadt, Baeck echoed the message of *Daniel*: "Israel[2] knew that beyond history … there dwells the great patience. World history has become patient justice." Baeck saw the essence of Judaism as the conquest of time, that each generation confronts tradition and rebuilds it with their own creativity. In his postwar commentary embracing the ethical view of the *Book of Daniel*, he recognized a longing for a future, a fulfillment of right in a world of right, and that, "Those in this people who have remained 'holy' will [be] … preserved for a future which is firmly established." At the end of the war, when Baeck was liberated from Theresienstadt, he prevented the camp's inmates from killing the guards and then stayed to minister to the sick and dying.

I love Jacob's invoking of Elie Wiesel at the end of his essay. Elie Wiesel was a child during the war. Wiesel's yearning for a Golem, like my wish for my mother, is the wish-fulfillment dream of a child from the perspective of one looking for a protector. Unfortunately, as Rabbi Loew knew, this wish for a righteous protector is a slippery slope. Golems in fiction and in real life, in the guise of military defenders, go amok and prove to be very difficult to return to dust. Baeck, as an adult burdened during the war with the existential threats to himself and his people, realized that the quiet resistance of cultural continuity and of choosing to maintain one's moral center are the paths to long-term survival and to peace.

2 "Israel" in this context refers to the Jewish people.

FEAR OF COLD

FEAR OF COLD

55th essay published
January 14, 2022

**Subscribers at time
of video's release**
556,494

**Views at time of
book's publication**
6.6 million

> You are reduced to a crawling thing on the margin of a disintegrating world. Nothing will so quickly isolate a man.

**Richard Byrd, 1938
"Alone"**

1

I love starting here, because the goal of these "Fear of" essays is generally to *get you to imagine*. Most of the audience is going to start off like this poor guy, confidently naive about the cold. If I do my job right, they will end in a very different place.

The scariest story I've ever read was written over 100 years ago by Jack London. It's called "To Build a Fire."

This story has very few hallmarks of your typical horror writing. There's only one human character and he is, generally, very sane. There are no spirits of the dead, no nightmares or hauntings, no guilt that ticks away like a time bomb.

And yet, while reading "To Build a Fire," I feel paralyzed in a way I haven't felt with any other written work. It is all of 16 pages long. It is about a man freezing to death.

He doesn't start freezing though. He starts confident and decently prepared, hiking alone through the Yukon back to a logging camp. The narration even describes him as "quick and ready in the things of life." But, as becomes immediately apparent, it only flatters him to highlight his naivete. Should he be traveling with only a dog as a companion? No he should not. Could he have worn more protective gear? Sure. But his real arrogance, the narration says, is that **"he was not able to imagine."**[1]

"Fifty degrees below zero meant 80 degrees of frost. Such facts told him that it was cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to consider his weaknesses as a creature affected by temperature. Nor did he think about man's general weakness, able to live only within narrow limits of heat and cold."

Most of us, in our day-to-day lives, live within this narrow spectrum of heat and cold and do so relatively thoughtlessly. Although we may not enjoy being cold, although we may build our houses and societies to avoid it, true frigophobia or cryophobia — fear of the cold — isn't a common one. Maybe it's because the cold feels predictable, kept in check by a calendar. Maybe it's because we can always bundle up, just "keep putting on layers!"

Maybe it's because, unlike spiders or the dark or an unexpected noise at night, few of us have really experienced the cold. Few of us have seen how ruthlessly it will break body and mind and spirit. The cold magnifies our flaws, reveals our every imperfection. It does not forgive mistakes.

In "To Build a Fire," the air is colder than 50 degrees below zero, colder than 60 below, colder than 70.[2] The man's mouth is frozen closed, something he expected. The tobacco juice from the chew in his cheek forms a long yellow icicle from his lips. He feels his nose begin to freeze, although this doesn't bother him too much.

Many short stories, particularly horror ones, are made by their twist endings. It's not until the twist, the last paragraph, or even last sentence, that we truly understand what's going on. That's not the case in "To Build a Fire." We know, almost as soon as it starts, that this man is going to die. The paralyzing magnetism of the story comes from finding out where, exactly, it becomes inevitable. Probably, the answer is "before the day even started." There was no way this man was ever going to survive a hike across the Yukon in 100 degrees of frost. But the arc of the story isn't a simple, linear freeze, it's a horrible series of dominos that fall, one after the other.

The first domino, probably, is the man plunging his leg into an icy pool just below a frozen riverbed. He had been carefully walking along this creek, he had looked for signs of hidden water, it didn't matter. But a frozen leg is only a death sentence if one can't build a fire, and the man can. He sits down with his frozen leg and patiently builds it, the way you need to build a fire, growing slowly from scraps of bark and dry grass to full-size sticks. Feeling begins to return to the man's fingers and toes.

The way London describes the feeling leaving your extremities in the cold is

2
I was worried that my own American insistence on using Fahrenheit would be a real obstacle to international audiences in an essay so contingent on temperature readings. In the video, I included a conversion to Celsius, but it ultimately didn't matter too much because in both Fahrenheit or Celsius, -50° is *fucking cold*.

DEFINING FEAR

Before the runaway success of my first "Fear of" essay, "Fear of Depths" in 2020, I had no intention of making it a multi-part thing. That meant that the second entry, "Fear of Cold," was the one that really established the hallmarks of the "Fear of" series: discussions of a wide-ranging collection of media, a few historical events covered in greater depth, and a thematically-related (ideally original) song at the end. But *most* important is that they treat their subject with a mix of dread and reverence. It's not enough for cold, or depths, or what lies underwater, to merely be scary. The essays must establish that these themes are somehow core to the human psyche — which makes them very intimidating to write!

poetic, but not inaccurate. He says that the blood of the man's body shrank back from the cold, withdrew from his digits because the blood was alive. The blood was trying to get away from the freeze. In reality, your hands will lose their warmth — lose their hot blood — within seconds. In these situations of extreme cold, the temperature of your hands will drop more than 30 degrees, from your body's typical 98.6 to closer to 60. It will continue to fall, your blood fleeing the cold, the longer you leave yourself exposed.

In "To Build a Fire," the second domino falls just as the man starts to warm his hands and feet. His fire, his savior, becomes his downfall. The heat from the flames rises into the branches of the tree above him. The tree warms just enough that snow slips off its branches, falling to the forest floor. It falls directly on the fragile collection of kindling, smothering the flames instantly. The fire — his lifeline — is out. This is the first time in the story where the man realizes how dire a situation he's in. London writes that the fire being snuffed was "like hearing his own judgment of death."

But he continues to fight. He can build another fire, this time not under a tree. He gathers more dry grass and sticks, although he has trouble closing his fingers around them. He has more bark to use for kindling in his pocket, although he can no longer feel it. The dominos are falling faster now. He tries to hold the box of matches, but his deadened fingers drop it into the snow. He tries again and again to pick it up, but he can't. In a last-ditch effort he spills everything left in the box, and, against all odds, manages to strike them all at once. Seventy matches blaze to life in his hands. He refuses to let them go, even when he can faintly feel them burning the flesh on his hands. In his desperation, he succeeds, he manages to light another fire — for almost 30 seconds, until he attempts to readjust the pile, and his hands, shaking uncontrollably, scatter the burning twigs across the snow.

It's all over by this point, and yet it keeps going. The man thinks that if he could kill the dog, his only companion, he could warm his hands in its body and build another fire, but he doesn't have the strength. He somehow finds the energy to run, and he does, blindly, **what feels like miles but was likely less than a hundred feet.**[3] He feels strangely warm and pictures himself among the men that may one day find his body. He falls asleep.

Fear of the cold is almost always paired with the danger of isolation. Some of our most famous horror fiction entombs its characters in a near-impenetrable blanket of frost, the cold acting as a barrier between them and safety. In *The Shining*, for instance, Jack Torrance and his family go to live at the Overlook Hotel during the winter, intending to do some upkeep on the premises and enjoy the weather-enforced family time. But as the cold closes in, the snow walling off the hotel from the rest of the world, the winter season of the Overlook Hotel instead externalizes the danger of the story. Threatened by the increasingly deranged Jack, Wendy and Danny are unable to reach out,

The sun sets on harrowing tales of hermits and Antarctic explorers

unable to escape. ==They are trapped by the cold just as they're trapped by Jack's abuse.==[4]

Within *The Shining*, there's also the unspoken notion that nothing — not the people nor even the hotel itself — is designed for this kind of cold. Jack was hired as a caretaker because the Overlook cannot survive the season by itself — faced with the unrelenting cold of the rocky mountains, the infrastructure would simply crumble. The brutal winter environment adds to the feeling that everything here somehow stands against nature. At the end of the book, the Overlook loses the battle, reduced to rubble in its stand against the elements. In the film, however, the cold deals a more personal end to Jack; he is frozen and thus preserved on the premises, rooted by the ice in space and time.

In John Carpenter's *The Thing*, and the short story it's based on, the blasted frozen desert of the Antarctic similarly serves as a wall between the characters and the rest of civilization. Living in a research base deep in Antarctica, a group of men find the frozen body of an alien (or find another research team who found it, depending on the adaptation). They recover its frozen body and examine it, but it's not long until the alien, awakened from its frozen slumber, starts to slaughter and impersonate the crew.

Although the titular "thing" is an abomination, a horror, the men stay close to it because they simply have no other choice. The alien *may* kill them. The cold will, no question. In the story, even before the creature is revealed, the outside is simply referred to as "...white death. Death of a needlefingered cold driven before the wind, sucking heat from any warm thing."

The Antarctic is alien to the humans, too, more similar to the surface of a barren moon than any other landscape on Earth. Externalized danger once again causing

[4]
The Shining and *The Thing* are such monumental pieces of horror film canon that I'd usually skip them to discuss something less mainstream. But I found it really neat that two of the greatest horror films (released just two years apart!) use cold in such similarly isolating ways. It's fun to find a new angle on the classics.

Admiral Richard Byrd's plane flies over Antarctica in 1929

5

I had to decide between writing about Byrd or my actual favorite early 20th century explorer, Ernest Shackleton. Immortalized in the outstanding book *Endurance* by Alfred Lansing, Shackleton's journey through the Antarctic is filled with far more thrills and adventure than Byrd; most notably, he and his men are trapped and fend for their life in the ice for nearly two years, yet not a single person dies. Shackleton's story also features such remarkable anecdotes as his crew playing shirtless soccer on an ice floe and a harrowing 800-mile open sea journey on a 22-foot long boat. But Byrd's isolation pairs better with Christopher Knight (and Shackleton's consistent sanity makes a poorer candidate for a fear-themed essay).

6

I can't help but love Byrd's mix of hyper-competency and idiotic pride. Both are equally vital parts of the story.

interior panic, every struggle exacerbated because of the inhuman cold around them in the neverending night. But in both *The Shining* and *The Thing*, the cold refuses to discriminate between pro- and antagonist. Jack freezes within the hedge maze; no amount of manic energy able to combat the ice. In *The Thing*, the Antarctic is ultimately what preserves the rest of humanity; although every man at the research station is destined to die by one method or another, the alien is trapped there too. The cold is the great equalizer. Nothing, man or beast, survives that cold forever.

But that doesn't stop them from trying.

Perhaps the most famous story of real-life survival in the Antarctic is Admiral Richard Byrd,[5] an American explorer in the early 20th century. Byrd and his expeditions were responsible for several Antarctic experiments and achievements, meteorological readings, et cetera. Byrd was notably one of the first two people to fly over the South Pole in a plane. His rounds of funding for exploration laid the groundwork for much of the research still being done today. But that's not the primary reason why people know who Richard Byrd is. He's famous because, for five months of the Antarctic winter, he lived alone, in a shack, in the continent's interior, while everything for 100 miles tried to murder him.

Byrd's stated purpose for spending the winter so far south was to gather scientific data, and the reason he claimed to go alone was because there wouldn't be room for three, and two might just end up annoying each other (seriously).[6] But in *Alone*, his memoir of the expedition, the streak of pride that runs through the whole thing is undeniable. Byrd is a man who understands the value of big, capital letter Accomplishments. He'd probably be frustrated that I had to qualify that he

was one of *two* people to fly over the South Pole. And so, for reasons explicit and unstated, purposes scientific and aspirational, Byrd and his team essentially buried a shack in the ice, carved a couple channels for food and other supplies. And then his team left, and Byrd remained.

The first part of Byrd's stay in the cold goes shockingly well. He takes his weather measurements every day, he creates little projects for himself, organizing his food and emergency supplies, he goes on walks, he reads. It's never *easy*, he is always living in a fundamentally inhospitable environment, but things go about as well as he hoped they would. However, he knows this accord with the elements is a tenuous one. In his memoir, he writes: "Relax once in the polar regions, and the artificial wall of security which you have so painstakingly erected about yourself may give way without warning."

I don't think Byrd would ever say he relaxed, and yet his artificial walls did indeed begin to crumble. Perhaps the single most dramatic instance was during what was supposed to be a routine wind speed reading. He opens the door to his shack and steps into a blizzard, a solid wall of snow, white death. He writes that "millions of tiny pellets exploded in my eyes, stinging like BB shot." He writes that "in the senseless explosion of sound, you are reduced to a crawling thing on the margin of a disintegrating world … **nothing will so quickly isolate a man.**"[7] He steps out into the blizzard and the gale scrambles his sense of surroundings and in an instant, the door back into the shack freezes shut.

There's another man who lived alone in the cold, slightly less famous than Richard Byrd, slightly more bizarre. **Christopher Knight**[8] lived as a hermit in the woods of northern Maine, without permanent shelter and almost completely isolated from other people, for 27 years. He stayed in a camp built in a near-invisible clearing between rocks in the forest, he stole from nearby houses, he lived there for almost three decades and only spoke to another person once — a startled "hi" as he encountered an unexpected hiker. Knight was so determined to be alone, and so paranoid of his camp being found, that he never lit a fire. Not once. He survived 27 winters of Maine outside without heat, with scavenged camp materials and **a single-minded determination not to die.**[9]

Winters in Maine, though not Antarctic-cold, can drop to -40 degrees and below. And yet somehow, Knight's strategy for survival relied almost exclusively on determination. Far from hibernating, he feared that the winters were so cold, the chill so brutal, that if he was asleep during the coldest hours, he may never wake up. Instead, during the harshest freezes Knight forced himself awake at 2 a.m. and paced around his camp for hours, pacing until daybreak. Sleep was the enemy, relaxation was the enemy. If he let himself submit to the cold, he'd be lost.

Richard Byrd didn't die when the door to his shack froze shut. He remembered a shovel that he left outside, managed to brace himself against his ventilation

7
It is consistently delightful to read the writings of old explorers and find that they were both the picture of macho-survivalism *and* near-poetic scribes of their environment. Byrd, Shackleton, William Beebe — all seemed to understand that bearing witness to the sublime came with the responsibility to communicate it as beautifully as they were able.

8
I read both "To Build a Fire" and the tale of Christopher Knight while at my previous job, an office gig where I routinely finished my day's work in a few hours. The rest of the day I would just read longform articles and free short stories on the internet. I can trace a lot of my essays back to something I read while killing time in that office.

9
Unlike Byrd, Knight was not a wilderness survivalist prior to becoming a hermit. He was just an older Gen X guy who was really, *really* good at learning on the job.

11

We hear a lot about people claiming to have seen heaven during a near-death experience; we hear far less about people claiming to have met *the Grim Reaper*. In a different piece of writing, I might have made Lady Death the central antagonist, repeatedly invoking her to describe the cold. But in this particular essay, it's important that death via cold is an intensely depersonalized experience, that the cold acts without malice or intention. Featuring Lady Death too heavily might have introduced the concept of defeating her; I didn't even want that to be a question here.

12

The rescue, of course, wasn't simple. It took over a month for a team to make it to Byrd's camp, and he had no way of knowing how far along the team was. He lit pots of gasoline on fire in attempts to signal them. At one point, he wrote his "eyeballs were frozen." *Waiting* is such an agonizing part of these stories; the survivors of the cold almost never know how much longer they'll have to hold out. Not having a predictable finish line makes Byrd's endurance even more impressive.

pipes, wedged the handle under the grip of the door, and strained until it popped open. Collapsing inside, he reflected that there were actually harder ways to die than freezing to death. A couple more minutes out in the cold and his senses would have given way to a "lush numbness," a desensitization that makes dying seem easy.

The closest Byrd came to dying was not easy though, and it was not as simple as freezing to death. Instead, it started slowly — he noted in his diary one day that he felt strangely depressed, though nothing particular seemed wrong. This feeling of listlessness continues, his ability to do simple tasks diminished, until one day he finds that his head is pounding so hard he is completely unable to move. His stove, as it turns out, hasn't been ventilating properly. Carbon monoxide from the burning fuel has been filling the shack with a slow stream of poison, gradually robbing Byrd of all his faculties. And so now, in the Antarctic winter, he faces an impossible choice: continue suffering from the poison that leaves him more bedridden every day or turn off the stove, the thing that was poisoning him, **the only source of heat in his world.**[10]

When Christopher Knight, the hermit, was as close to death as he ever came, months into a particularly brutal winter, he says he saw a literal **"Lady Death," a cloaked woman who appeared in his camp.**[11] He was out of food, out of propane. He was freezing to death in his bed. He recognizes now that Lady Death was probably a hallucination, probably some fevered vision, but he isn't entirely sure. In his darker moments, he says that he still thinks about walking into the woods, sitting down in the cold, and letting Lady Death take him.

While Byrd lay, unable to move, in his shack in the Antarctic, he measured the cold by how far the frost crept up the walls. The temperature sank impossibly, 70 below outside his shack. His single room was engulfed by ice. "I lived a thousand years," he wrote. "And all of them were agonizing."

Byrd's original plans were to stay eight months in the shack. Even in the depths of his poisoning, even facing near-certain death, he refused to tell his base camp just how poorly he was doing. Like the entire expedition, this was caused by a mix of practicality and pride. He feared that those who tried to reach him would perish on the way. His vanity would not allow himself to admit just how dire things had become. Fortunately for him, however, the men he was corresponding with noticed the steady decline of his morse code. After four months, it was nearly unintelligible. Dots and dashes betrayed just how close Admiral Richard Byrd was to death. **After five months, he was rescued.**[12]

Both men almost died in their self-imposed deep freeze, both very nearly lost themselves to that white death. And yet, in that time, both undeniably also experienced something close to euphoria. Richard Byrd writes rapturously about the spectacle of the aurora, its undulating serpentine folds, what he feels is its implicit storytelling. He pictures the light shows in the dark Antarctic night as

somehow a representation of good versus evil. There are stretches of time when he feels the cosmos are telling him what it means to be alive. He says that these shows left him **"with the tingling feeling that I had witnessed a scene denied to all other men."**[13]

For Christopher Knight, a man who sought isolation to a more extreme extent than almost anyone else, the deep freeze of winter offered the complete opposite — a sort of divine pause, the only time of the year when everything stopped — no sounds of humans, animals, or even the rustling of the leaves. After he was forcibly removed from his forest hideout, it seemed that the memory of winters lost wore heaviest on him. "What I miss most in the woods," Knight said, "is somewhere in between quiet and solitude. What I miss most is stillness."

Cold can be an individual antagonist, needlefingered, intimate, but just as often it serves as a society-level threat. Rare are the people who choose to go out into a freeze unsheltered — much more often, the cold comes to us.

You don't have to think back far for an example of this. In 2021, a series of disastrous winter storms hit the U.S. and many areas saw huge numbers of people lose power. Texas, most infamously of all, had an almost complete breakdown of its electrical grid during its coldest period in living memory. But it was not, as a point of fact, unprecedented. Ten years earlier, a series of blizzards caused a series of similar rolling blackouts across the state. Recommendations made by experts on how to properly winterize and avoid further catastrophes were subsequently ignored by the state's leaders, and then a decade later, it happened again.

Now, to someone who lives further north, the temperatures during Texas's freeze may not seem *that* cold. It almost never dipped below zero, the absolute chilliest days wouldn't be anything unusual in Minnesota or Maine. But, of course, the ability to withstand cold on a societal level has little to do with individual toughness, and the numerical temperature matters much less than the resources a place has put into withstanding it. Texas' collapse is instead a reminder that the cold will find the weakness at every point of infrastructure, force open the cracks that can otherwise be ignored. Many of the deaths in Texas weren't from simple hypothermia but the carbon monoxide poisoning that resulted from improvising home heaters, or even fires that spread from never-before-used fireplaces. Water pipes burst, street lights blackened, people were forced close together in shelters

A SCHOOL BUS IN A BLIZZARD

Although I only briefly mention Minnesota in this essay, the choice of state was intentional — my mom and her siblings grew up near the tiny town of Chokio, Minnesota. Naturally, they had many encounters with the cold. Most notably, three of her siblings were once trapped on a broken-down school bus for *seven hours* in the middle of a blizzard, with 75 mile-per-hour winds and next to zero visibility. The heat on the bus went out after the first hour, and the bus driver ultimately made the decision to trek through the whiteout to look for help. Incredibly, he made it to a nearby farm and returned with a team of men and tractors that hauled the bus away. The only teacher onboard the bus reportedly told the kids, "If we're lucky, we might live till morning." But everyone made it out and my aunt was interviewed for the *Today* show!

13
His actual recounting of the event is even more surreal than I included here. After describing the aurora as a great snake, he writes **"star after star disappeared as the serpentine folds covered them. It was like witnessing a tragedy on a cosmic scale; the serpent, representing the forces of evil, was annihilating beauty."**
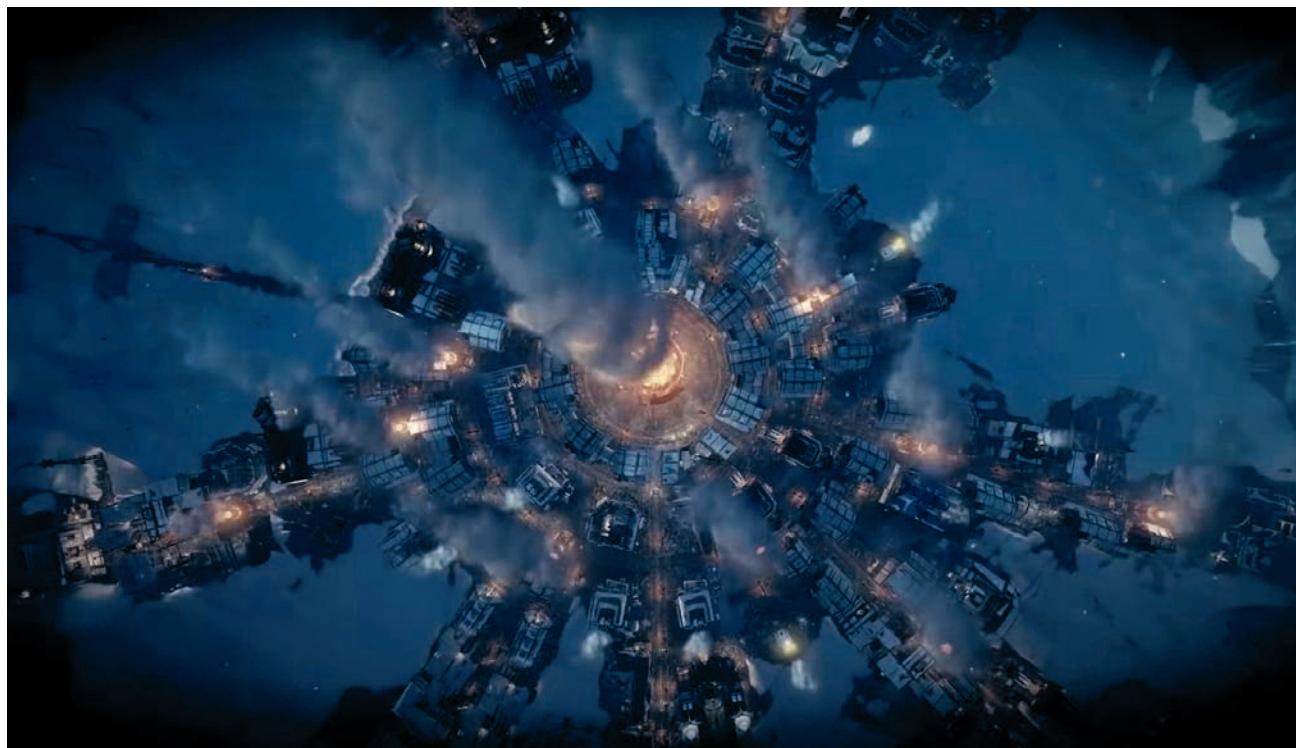
A base struggling to outpace the plummeting temperature in *Frostpunk*

despite the ongoing presence of a global pandemic. Much like COVID, the cold exposes the vulnerabilities in our systems that were always present — and exposes the inhumanity of the people who profit by ignoring those vulnerabilities.

And when I look at Texas, I don't see a freak accident but the beginning of a trend. Summers are going to keep getting hotter and winters will keep getting colder and the building blocks that make up our society are fundamentally not prepared for the climate hell that we're staring down the barrel of.

But you gotta admit — *it makes a great story!*[14]

This is the basis for Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer*, a movie set in an apocalyptic ice age brought on by climate change. It's also the background quote-unquote "science" for *The Day After Tomorrow*, my personal favorite big disaster movie.

It's also the context for the survival sim *Frostpunk*, a game bold enough to ask "What if *SimCity*, but with frostbite-based amputations?" *Frostpunk* takes place in an alternate history 19th century in which an unexplained sudden ice age decimates most of Europe, leaving scant few wandering bands of people and even fewer coal-powered generators that *maybe* — if you plan things *exactly* right — can keep humanity alive through the plummeting temperature.

But *Frostpunk* is not, at least initially, a game that lauds players with easy victories in civil engineering. Although the game can be min-maxed to perfection, my experiences with it were far more like Jack London's story, a series of ominous dominoes toppling, one after another. Except in this case, it's not one person, it's a city. And in this case, **I didn't even realize they were falling until far too late.[15]**

14

Sometimes I feel very corny transitioning from stories of real-life horror back into fictionalized ones. This was one of those times — I tried to lean into it, but it's not my favorite segue.

15

Frostpunk and *The Long Dark* were both games I played specifically for this essay. Neither are really my genre, and playing them back-to-back made me yearn for any game that didn't shoot my anxiety levels through the roof. Do non-stressful games about the cold even exist? I should've played *Ice Climbers* for the NES instead.

Managing your city is a challenge of managing many different resources and conditions, a juggling act of making sure you have enough wood, steel, *and* coal, enough houses so people don't have to sleep unsheltered, enough medical clinics that the sick can recover and quickly get back to work. For me, it was always about two things too many; I'd be really proud of the amount of wood I had stockpiled, and then realize that our food reserves had been totally used up. At multiple points, I had to turn almost the entirety of the city's labor force into a coal-gathering machine, ignoring every other problem because, I mean, if we ran out of coal to keep the heat on, none of the other problems in the city would matter. My adherence to a "moral" city, my refusal to enforce 14-hour shifts or put children to work, meant that we were constantly on the precipice of disaster.

Playing *Frostpunk* feels like living out the tiny catastrophes of "To Build a Fire," making a mistake as simple as dropping a match in the snow, and watching those mistakes ripple out to hundreds. Early on, I had a team of explorers find a defunct coal mine, and they offered me a choice: should we salvage a modest amount of supplies from the mine now, with the potential of reactivating it later? Or should we completely break down the operation, seize everything now, and just hope for another consistent source of fuel to present itself in the future?[16]

I generally pride myself on my delayed gratification; my ability to hold off on immediate rewards for a larger prize in the future. But I looked at this situation and was completely overwhelmed with the immediate gains — 200 pieces of coal, wood, and steel! An absolute fortune!

Later in the game, when I had my generator cranked so high that it burned through 200 pieces of coal in a matter of seconds, I thought back to that coal mine. As the temperature plummeted further and further below zero, I realized that I had knocked the first domino over hours before without even thinking about it. As I scrambled to keep my city at a livable temperature, forsaking all other resources and every other standard of civilization in the face of that white death, I had a sudden flashback to a story I heard as a kid, one that's stuck with me for probably two decades now. It is, hilariously enough, from the Little House series by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*,[17] Ma and Pa are going to town, but Pa says that he's got to bring the wood inside before he does because a blizzard is going to roll through. He tells his daughters a story about some kids who didn't have enough wood inside, and it was too cold to go out in the blizzard. He says that as their cabin got colder, the kids ran out of wood completely. They destroyed the woodbox, then the chairs, then all the furniture in the house in a desperate attempt to keep the fire alive. It wasn't enough though — when their parents finally got home, Pa said that the kids were "froze stark stiff." This story causes a sort of mania in Laura and her sister, who are so worried about freezing in their house that they bring in all of the wood from their woodpile outside, much to the bemusement of Pa.

16
Video essayist Noah Caldwell-Gervais wrote about *Frostpunk* several years before me. The focus of his essay was a comparison between different games in the "Survival Strategy" genre (*Outpost*, *Surviving Mars*), but when discussing *Frostpunk*, he can't help but turn a poetic phrase or two about the cold. In describing the final minutes of the game, he says: **"the temperature drops lower and lower, until finally a storm arrives of such apocalyptic proportions that it seems like the entire city is exposed directly to the vacuum of space. We never leave the Earth, but the Earth tries its damnedest to evict us anyway."** Wow, someone should pay that guy to write more about the cold! (page 170)

17
I looked for this story for so long I started to assume I just made it up — I was completely thrown by it *not* being part of *The Long Winter*, another book by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Finally, I asked Twitter and a stranger found it in exactly fifteen minutes.

18

I've never had it diagnosed but I believe I have some mild form of Raynaud's syndrome, a blood flow issue that affects extremities. I'll look down on a walk in mildly chilly weather and realize that several of my fingers have turned completely white. I usually take the opportunity to wave my hand in my partner's face and yell "dead fingers!!" but it is slightly unnerving to know exactly which parts of my body would succumb to frostbite first.

19

This paragraph also works as an excellent description for depression — the cold is so oppressive in *The Long Winter* that every character deals with this form of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Writers also just love to externalize emotions as weather — I recently played the original *Max Payne*, which includes countless lines about what the falling snow represents… **"A hint of desperation had crept into the snow storm," "Snow fell like confetti over the Devil's parade,"** etc.

20

A strange idea I considered including in this essay: the "cold chain," the connected web of refrigerated transportation that delivers food from any season to anywhere in the world. If the "cold chain" broke down, most of our grocery store ecosystems would fall into crisis. Included in this idea were the massive "cheese caves" that cheese producers use for storage due to their consistently low underground temperatures. Cheese! The link between "Fear of Cold" and "Fear of Depths!"

The Little House series often spoke frankly about the perils of 19th-century life in the Midwest but I don't remember anything else as dark as this story — through only a couple lines, I could clearly picture the kids' desperation turning to hypothermia as even their furniture didn't provide enough fuel for the fire to stay alight. It was only in researching this video that I learned Wilder's original version of this story, written in her non-fiction autobiography, is even more detailed and even more horrifying. The basic setup remains the same — kids at home, while their parents are kept away by a blizzard. But the simple "froze stark stiff" is replaced by detailed descriptions; the kids attempted to leave the house after their stovepipe collapsed. All five were found in a snowbank nearby — three were dead, frozen completely. The oldest, a 12-year-old girl, had survived and managed to keep the youngest, a baby, alive by swaddling it in her coat. Though the baby was barely chilled, **the 12-year-old's limbs were frozen.**[18] Pa said that she screamed as they thawed her arms and eventually amputated a leg.

The version of the story I knew, the one that stuck in my head for decades, was somehow the *more child-friendly* telling. I can't believe how much worse it got. And it's hardly the only time Wilder brought up the cold. In fact, it seems like the biggest threat her family ever faced, its presence always met with a dramatic darkening of the tone in what are, ostensibly, children's books. In *The Long Winter*, one in which her whole family is snowed in for months, she wrote:

```
"There were no more lessons. There was nothing in the world
but cold and dark and work and coarse brown bread and winds
blowing. The storm was always there, outside the walls, waiting
sometimes, then pouncing, shaking the house, roaring, snarling,
and screaming in rage ... she did not ever feel awake. She felt
beaten by the cold and the storms. She knew she was dull and
stupid but she could not wake up."[19]
```

Tales of the cold are almost always made of long, harsh periods of shelter and depression mixed with tiny victories against the immovable force. Laura's family sings together while in the midst of the blizzard, generator upgrades in *Frostpunk* bring brief periods of livability. In *The Long Dark*, a survival game set in an apocalyptic winter, achievements are minuscule compared to other games in the genre. There's no fortress to construct in *The Long Dark*, farms to fully automate, or escape vehicles to build. Instead, moments of victory are sewing together a slightly warmer coat, finding a whetstone, lighting a fire. *The Long Dark* is a pure survival game. Although there are wolves and bears in the game, it's cold and hunger you'll be fighting for the majority of your time. The endgame doesn't look so different from the beginning.

Unlike most enemies in video games, or antagonists in stories, there is no conquering the cold. You can merely survive it.

The cold is a bizarre force though, because although it can obviously be deadly, it also preserves — **not just in food but in people.**[20] Most of you probably

have heard of cryonics, the pseudoscientific idea that if you freeze a body now, we'll be able to resuscitate it far in the future. Although cryonics are basically impossible to prove effective with our current technology — which I guess is the point — cases of survival in impossible cold are not. Far from our popular sayings related to the temperature of death — cold, dead hands and the like — medical wisdom actually goes in the reverse direction. "You're not dead until you're warm and dead."

Cardiac arrest generally means death in less than 30 minutes, but if you're frozen that time can be multiplied, with successful resuscitations after *hours*. A doctor colloquially known as Professor Popsicle [Gordon Giesbrecht] has said, "We've learned that there really is no temperature so low you shouldn't try to save someone." The cold's ability to preserve lends it an almost mythic quality — the same force can maintain life in a brain frozen for hours, keep a neon-jacketed body locked to the **same point of Everest**[21] for decades, and mummify a man so effectively that 5,000 years later, we can tell what he ate hours before he died. On a purely theoretical level, you have to admire the cold; it is so straightforward, so ruthlessly efficient at what it does.

It is, of course, harder to appreciate when you're experiencing it. My favorite gross-out story of the cold, one so absurd I have to include it, is from Howard Somervell, a mountaineer in the early 20th century. Somervell was on one of the earlier attempts to summit Mt. Everest, but as the team climbed higher and higher up the mountain, he found himself seized with coughing fits. Somervell eventually coughed so hard that he felt something stick in his throat — he actually begins to choke, he can't call out for help, he sits down in the snow to die and then finally manages to hack the thing in his throat out into the snow. It was a *piece of his own larynx*, frostbitten and detached from his innards. He was fine by the way — made it back down the mountain, lived another 50 years. Just left a little bit of himself behind.

Almost 90 years after Somervell's adventure, on a Friday in late November 2009, I went on a trip to Grayson Highlands, Virginia, with some friends and their parents. Our plan was to hike in, camp a couple nights, explore the trails while we were there. Grayson Highlands is gorgeous by the way — most of the mountains are heavily forested but these are bare, with long sections where you can walk along clear ridgelines. There are rocky outcroppings and beautiful overlooks, **it's one of my favorite places in the state to hike.**[22]

We arrived around noon and started to walk. It was chilly but in the fun

21

Another story cut for time: Jon Krakauer and his colleagues' disastrous Everest expedition, as recounted in the harrowing book *Into Thin Air*. One image that's always stuck with me is his description of Beck Weathers, whose sleeping bags were blown off his body by hurricane-force winds — he somehow survived a night with both his hands and face exposed, 26,000 feet up Mt. Everest. Krakauer says his skin was the color of a "dirty bathroom sink." Weathers' amputations included his right arm, all digits of his left hand, and his nose. And yet, somehow, the guy is still alive.

22

Grayson Highlands is also home to herds of wild ponies, which are very gentle and will occasionally allow themselves to be pet.

CRYPTOCURRENCY VS. THE COLD

One of my earliest ideas for the climate section of this video dealt with our favorite new technology: cryptocurrency. Because processes like bitcoin mining use so much energy and produce so much heat, investors were setting up mining warehouses in some of the coldest places in the world to take advantage of the free natural cooling. However, *because* of our planet's catastrophically unregulated energy usage, climate change is actually heating up those frigid places, meaning they're *less effective* at cooling energy-hungry technology. I loved the irony of tech companies moving to a place for the very cold they were actively destroying, but it required a little too much digression to fit in and would have messed up the essay's pacing.

The highlands where I nearly froze, reproduced in *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020*

sort of way, the activity of the ascent keeping us warm. It was exciting that the wind occasionally gusted hard enough to almost knock us over. I can't remember exactly when the temperature started to drop — I do know sundown would have been about 5 p.m. I just remember that those gusts started to cut straight through the light windbreaker I was wearing; my flexible gloves didn't seem to retain any heat at all.

Looking back, I don't think it was *that* cold, taken in pure degrees — I doubt it sunk much below 15. But in real terms, I was simply unprepared. I had the equipment needed for a sunny fall hike in a southern state, not an overcast mountaintop with sudden temperature changes and a constantly howling wind. To once again quote Jack London, the forecast for that day told me "that it was cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead [me] to consider [my] weaknesses as a creature affected by temperature."

I remember getting to our campsite, reaching into my tent bag, and being completely unable to determine if what my numb fingers were touching was the canvas of the tent or the poles that would form the frame. I dumped the whole thing out on the ground and tried to pick up the poles to snap them together, but simply couldn't make the connections. Twelve years out, I couldn't tell you if the problem was exclusively physical or if my brain had also somehow been deadened. What I know is I stood there and made no progress, increasingly frustrated and alarmed that I couldn't do the single action I needed to give myself shelter.

Within minutes, my dad — who was also on the hike — realized what was going on, gave me his gloves, snapped the poles together, and staked the tent to the ground. I more or less fell inside, got in my sleeping bag at what couldn't

have been past 6 p.m., and immediately went to sleep. I half remember being woken a little while later, again by my dad, who gave me some food warmed by a camp stove and hot chocolate. I passed out again. Looking back, I think about Christopher Knight, who forced himself awake at the coldest parts of the night, stubbornly paced to keep his body functioning and warm. I failed just about every test the cold threw at me. I am possibly overdramatizing the situation, but in my memory that is the closest I have ever felt to death. It really felt like my dad saved my life.

The next morning we all got up, a little shaken by how unexpectedly extreme the previous night had been. We first hesitantly, then enthusiastically, pitched **the idea of leaving early.**[23] I wasn't the only one who had a bad time.

There are many places on Earth with "permafrost," a layer of frozen soil and sediment beneath the surface, one that is, theoretically, permanent. Winter, summer, this stays cold, keeping all the dead plants and organisms on that layer cold with it — preserving them, in a way; keeping their bodies locked beneath the ground. But as with so many things, our naming of permafrost assumed a level of stability we denied the world. For many years now, permafrost has been thawing, and with it resurfaces startling reminders of the past.

In Spitsbergen, an island in Norway, human bones appear to be rising out of the ground. A 1600s whaling graveyard, preserved in the ice for 400 years, is now seeing the permafrost exhume the bodies it kept hidden — humans, whales, pieces of ships, all emerging from the Earth. In previous years, this permafrost acted as a sort of shield; not only would bodies remain permanently frozen, but so too would any diseases or dangers they held with them. Now, with a steadily climbing global temperature, that shield weakens.

A small-scale plague of viral anthrax broke out in Russia when a heatwave exposed the frozen corpses of 75-year-old reindeer from the permafrost. Back in Spitsbergen, corpses from a century ago still held the full sequence of the 1918 flu. In Longyearbyen, Norway, **the northernmost town in the world**[24], there's a joke that residents "are not allowed to die." In reality, this refers to burial. The town will not allow corpses from today to freeze instead of decomposing, potentially holding diseases in perpetuity and unleashing them on archaeologists centuries from now.

And while that's a noble effort, the deadliest thing is already bound up with all the bodies in the permafrost: carbon. When functioning normally, the frozen ground prevents plants, animals, even humans, from releasing their carbon back into the atmosphere. The cold keeps the remains and the carbon they carry. But as the frost thaws, that carbon is released too, billions of tons of it, that in turn increases the global warming causing the thaw in the first place, accelerating the heating/thawing process in a vicious cycle. Like in Carpenter's *The Thing*, the cold, left undisturbed, would have held the threat

23
Several years after my experience in the Grayson Highlands, I did a couple hikes in the Scottish Highlands with a "hillwalking" club. On one of these hikes, we were forced to turn around due to seemingly impenetrable winds and rain that brought visibility down to a few feet. Only a few minutes after turning back down the mountain, we ran into a quintessentially Scottish man and his young daughter, wearing nothing more rugged than peacoats and rain boots. They greeted us, said it was a lovely day for a hike, and continued up into the gale. It was like having an experience with a cryptid.

24
There are some great YouTube videos about living in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), one of the coldest inhabited places on Earth, where locals defrost enormous blocks of ice for drinking water and school is only canceled if it's colder than -65°. These videos don't detail "fear of cold" as much as "coexistence with cold." The Longyearbyen anecdote about "not being allowed to die" fit better with the themes of the essay, but those Yakutia videos are very fun to watch.

A weakening fire indicates the futility of fighting the cold

25

As many commenters pointed out, kelvin isn't measured in degrees. This should simply read "1 kelvin." Sorry, NERDS (and thank you for the correction).

26

This is still mind-blowing to me. I cannot believe that we've engineered the most extreme instance of something as core to existence as "cold." There also exists a version of "absolute hot"; a concept that's referred to as the "Planck temperature." Scientists have come nowhere near producing the Planck temperature, which is good because it would somehow unify gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. From my perspective as a non-physicist, this is even further outside my comprehension than absolute zero and even more terrifying.

as long as necessary. Unlike *The Thing*, once the dangers of the permafrost are released, they cannot be confined. No matter where we are, we will feel the impermanence of the permafrost.

It's little surprise that the coldest naturally occurring temperature on Earth was recorded in Antarctica. It's either -128 or -135, depending on if you want ground level or satellite measurements. In any case, the continent fulfills its promise as, "The end of nowhere. An inferno of ice. The Earth's underworld."

The coldest naturally occurring place in space, as far as we know, is the Boomerang Nebula. It's part of the constellation "Centaurus," it's about 5,000 light years away, and, thanks to the expelling of ultracold gas from a dying star, maintains a temperature of about **1 degree**[25] kelvin, or 1 degree above absolute zero — that's about -459 degrees Fahrenheit. This is less than *half* the temperature of the vacuum of space in general, which holds a little higher than 2 degrees kelvin, thanks to background radiation from the Big Bang.

But the absolute coldest place in the universe — as far as we know, the coldest temperature anywhere has ever been, ever — **is back on Earth.**[26] In labs across the world for the past century, scientists have pushed temperatures lower. 1 kelvin may be the lowest temperature in space, but we continue to go colder, far far below 1, within thousandths and millionths of a degree of absolute zero. Like the speed of light, it seems like something we may be able to get unbelievably close to, but never reach.

Cold itself, in terms of physics, is defined by absence. The absence of energy, the stilling of particles. The lower the temperature, the slower the particle movement within. In the theoretical, impossible, object at absolute zero, there is no movement whatsoever; every particle within the object would be at rest. In a poetic sense, the hermit Christopher Knight was correct from a physics

standpoint when describing the quiet of winter: **"somewhere in between quiet and solitude. What I miss most is stillness."**[27]

It will take until the end of the universe for natural temperatures to best those created in a lab on Earth. When every star has gone out and every black hole has evaporated and the radiation from the big bang fizzles away, all the nothing that exists will reach the same temperature, some impossibly small decimal — still not absolute zero. But about as close as anything will ever get.

We, as humans, are inherently fallible. We build houses with cracks in the walls, strike matches that singe and fall from our fingertips, seek solitude without ensuring self-sufficiency. **And fortunately for our survival,**[28] we are generally insulated from these mistakes. A cracked wall, a singed finger, is a setback, not a catastrophe.

The cold will strip that insulation bare, remove our layers of protection, show us how desperate a situation really is. The cold punishes arrogance, forces isolation, remembers our mistakes. But to depict the cold as malicious, antagonistic, is to limit its power. The cold is not an anthropocentric force. It doesn't care one way or another about its effect on us.

It was present before *anything* existed.

It will remain after everything is done.

27
This is the maximum amount of thematically connected poeticism I'll ever be able to wring out of one of these essays. For such a wide-ranging piece, I'm very proud of how it all wraps up here.

28
I have been north of the Arctic Circle once in my life. When I was a Boy Scout, I took a bus trip from North Carolina to Prudhoe Bay, one of the northernmost cities in Alaska. I took the opportunity to jump in the Arctic Ocean, and although it was July, the water still knocked the breath out of me. We camped a ways outside the city and the sun never dipped below the horizon.

HUDDLED AGAINST THE VOID

By Noah Caldwell-Gervais

In "Fear of Cold," Jacob talks about his experience camping with his family, where the cold brought him closer to the edge of his own mortality than he'd ever ventured. Even though he was with people he was safe around, even though he was in a place that was not otherwise dangerous, the danger crept in slowly, degree by degree. The cold made him small. The cold made an animal out of him — or revealed the animal more clearly than it usually appears. Jacob's vulnerability in both admitting and exploring the terror that can creep in from something so simple as the cold is the key to what makes his writing so enjoyable for me.

NOAH CALDWELL-GERVAIS

(he/him)

Noah Caldwell-Gervais is a video essayist on YouTube who writes primarily about video games and travel. He lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife and dogs.

I can relate: I'm an animal too, and the cold scares the shit out of me. For about a year, my wife and I drove around the American West in a 1973 Volkswagen bus, and in that year we were often confronted with the cold. I can't sleep when the temperature drops too low. My body wakes me up, full of adrenaline, needing action because — *obviously* — I am dying and this needs to be addressed. We add more blankets, but the blankets have gaps. It's hard to breathe with my head under the covers, but otherwise, the heat I have left pours out the top. My wife and I cling to each other for warmth, stealing from each other, stuffing the dog between us so

> **"I can relate: I'm an animal too, and the cold scares the shit out of me."**

that there is no individual left in the bed, just a pile of mammals trying to make it through the night.

My favorite moment in these long, sleepless nights is dawn: a satisfaction that has to be earned by persisting through the worst of it, those couple of hours before when the cold seems purgatorial and endless. "Surely it can't get fucking colder than this," I think at two in the morning, only for it to become so much more tangibly cold by four in the morning that I shiver uncontrollably for minutes at a time.

But then, the light. The light brings the heat, and the heat heals. There is a thrill in playing along the edge of dangerous things; there's a drama in this precarity and the contrast it brings. While the dark of four in the morning and the nadir of the freezing cold it brings is so awful I wonder why I left home in the first place, once that sun hits and my body comes to life again I feel powerful and new. It's not that what doesn't kill me makes me stronger, it's that having not died reveals that I had been stronger than I thought in the first place, that I am a more capable animal than I had been giving myself credit for. There is a powerful catharsis in having been able to endure something like that at all; the sense of being triumphantly alive comes as a powerful contrast to the deathly indifference of the cold.

The way Jacob frames his essay with "To Build a Fire" teases out the danger of that edge so beautifully because it starts with hubris. It starts with underestimating the indifference of nature and overestimating the capabilities of the self. The coming of the dawn is only so thrilling because I have not actually begun to die. I was just dangling my feet over the precipice. Another 20, 30 degrees colder and I would be in free fall and wouldn't have any kind of opinion on Jacob's essay either

way. Even as it was, the humidity of our warmth iced over every window in the bus, it iced the door handles, it iced the door frame, it trapped us in the bus even after the sun had risen until we kicked the driver's door open from the inside. Even after the sun heats things up, good luck trying to *start* an old engine in that kind of cold.

What we are as animals and what we build to protect ourselves from the cold is just so fragile and inadequate compared to what the cold really is. Which is why, having started the essay with one man in front of one fire, Jacob ends the essay in the depths of space, exploring the extremes of how cold it can get from the standpoint of physics and astronomy. Because it's not a fear or a force that's supernatural, it's about the most natural thing there is. It is absence. It is, as Jacob points out, a stillness. He brings up that one hermit's account of personifying the cold as a lady Grim Reaper, death itself. From a physics standpoint, cold is stillness. From a symbolic standpoint, that threshold of stillness and calm is indistinguishable from the threshold of death itself. The threshold past which things cease to be and cease to move, down to the subatomic level when it becomes closer and closer to the theoretical endpoint of absolute zero.

The brilliance of Jacob's "Fear of" series is how well and how seemingly effortlessly he draws the thread from one end of the conversation to the other. We have to begin with what's true on an animal level because that's where the fear builds, within the body as it suffers — which is frightening enough. But it's not the whole of it, not the core of it. The core is the metaphysical *implication* of being so vulnerable, so small, so close to death all the time without even realizing our "animal weaknesses." Every time the essay pivots to a new example, that example expands the frame. It builds on that animal fear

"Over the course of just 45 minutes, we have gone from a campfire to a dying star…"

until it becomes possible to see all the other complex facets: why the cold terrifies on a symbolic level, how the cold functions as a narrative antagonist in storytelling, how mental degradation and madness go so hand in hand with the slow shutdown of the body when the cold turns from unpleasant to sinister. Over the course of just 45 minutes, we have gone from a campfire to a dying star and tied the two together with the same unifying emotions and the same metaphysical frame. That's just good fucking nonfiction right there.

As a writer, I'm envious — I always come the long way around to making my points. If I tried to tackle this subject, I figure it would've taken me 45 minutes just to wrap up talking about Jack London. Jacob's writing is lean and concise in a very beautiful way. He's got a talent for zeroing in on the exact emotional core of his chosen subject and getting at it right away, building out from it in ways that are then evocative and surprising. To choose something so broad, like "the fear of cold," and then cover nothing but perfectly relevant illustrations that reach an all-encompassing conclusion within the space of less than an hour is a genuinely remarkable level of craft. "Fear of Cold" could've easily been a three-hundred-page doorstop of a nonfiction title, and if it had been left to me I wouldn't be able to help myself. But Jacob is just a better writer than that and manages the same steps with ruthless, razor-sharp editorial efficiency.

The craft isn't why I love Jacob's work, though, that's just why I admire it. It's the emotional core that he so immediately hones in on that makes it stick with me. In every example given, he never loses the thread of what makes the subject human, or what makes the impersonal hostility of the cold frightening. Even when he pivots from fiction, anecdote, and biography to more formal nonfiction

topics like Texas' failure to protect its own electrical grid, Jacob presents a sympathy for every subject he talks about, from the individual to the community. What he talks about in those sections is more tied to broader social responsibility than the other examples used, but there is no separation between them in *how* the examples are used. Both the individual and the community are tied together with this sympathetic thread of slowly realizing that things have gotten *out of hand*, that things are more severe than expected, that what's terrifying about the cold is how quickly a wrong assumption can turn to fatal consequences.

I feel that the subtext of the essay is how fear of the cold is somewhat indistinguishable from fear of the void or fear of death in general. Jacob doesn't use too many sci-fi examples but one of my favorite illustrations of cold as an instrument of horror is when, for whatever reason, a character in space has their helmet broken or takes it off to spare themselves a death by suffocation. That fast crystallization, eyes glazing over and freezing solid, the ice turning the body into something fragile even in death — there's such an awful emptiness in that. And then the body invariably tumbles further out into void and darkness, smaller and smaller, utterly insignificant and utterly inadequate against the vastness and indifference of the universe. In space, in sci-fi, this is often a hubristic consequence of seeking to touch the void, venturing where we do not belong. But the fear of cold is a little more terrifying because these are instances where the void reaches out to touch us. We live our lives in places that are safe enough, in ways that are comfortable enough, but even within that comfort, we are fragile. We are closer to the void than we think, every day of our lives, even when we do not wish to perceive it that way.

"We are closer to the void than we think, every day of our lives, even when we do not wish to perceive it that way"

Good nonfiction, as a reader, shows us the world in ways that we either struggle to perceive or do not wish to perceive, showing us things we didn't know, making connections we wouldn't have made ourselves. Jacob is masterful at doing this. He writes about his subjects with warmth, and sympathy, and yet this does not prevent him from also exploring the things beyond this campfire, the things that are inhuman and terrifying even when they could not be more a part of nature itself. In this vast and uncaring universe, we absolutely *are* animals. We huddle around the fire for warmth, to keep away the cold and stave off the dark. Traditionally, the way humans get through a night like that is with stories. Words help keep the dark away. They help keep the flame alive. Jacob's writing has a warmth that offers comfort against the void. And I can't think of a higher compliment for a storyteller than that.

THE FUTURE OF WRITING ABOUT GAMES

THE FUTURE OF WRITING ABOUT GAMES

You feel compelled to keep moving into a darkness so complete that your reflection becomes visible on the screen, and it is as if the figures in the image were journeying inside you, delving into your flesh

Jamil Jan Kochai, 2019
"Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain"

1

My existence on *GameFAQs* was enabled by a bar mitzvah present, a first generation iPod Touch. With the internet now at my fingertips, I sought out as much games writing as I could and landed on the contentious pages of *GameFAQs*. I even tried writing my own guides a couple times — a sniper guide for the original *Borderlands* and a titan-difficulty walkthrough for *God of War 2*. Sadly, I don't think I finished either and the hard drive that held them is long defunct.

36,000 words...

was the length of the essay that taught me what writing about games could be. 36,000 words is roughly 115 pages, or at least it is when formatted into *GameFAQs.com*'s characteristically bare presentation. And it was in that raw text file that I read Peter Eliot's behemoth work, "Talking ICO: An Annotation."

As a kid, I was the prototypical lurker on GameFAQs' notoriously rambunctious forums.[1] It was the first place I learned about the concept of unbalanced characters, the first place I heard accusations of playing a game "the wrong way," the first place I experienced that feeling of, "I thought these people liked this game? Why do they talk about it like they hate it so much?"

But among the gamer-fueled fires of the mid-aughts, there were glimmers of brilliance. *GameFAQs* offered players the ability to write "walkthroughs," and left the definition of a walkthrough exceedingly vague. What, exactly, the writer chose to walk us through was up to them. It's where, for example, I first ran across the "secret seekers" and their quixotic quest.

It's where I read Joseph Christopher's fantastically weird "crowd-pleaser's guide" to **_Marvel Vs. Capcom 2_**[2], which included suggestions on how to roleplay as different kinds of arcade legends.

```
"The Professional: Wear the typical office-worker type of attire,
Formally introduce yourself as someone who'll either head an
MVC2 Official Strategy Guide, an MVC2 website, or a researcher
on the psychological effects and/or epileptic tendencies of
prolonged exposure to video games. Ask some personal info from
your opponent like family life, working life, lovelife, etc."
```

And, just beginning my lifelong affair with the games of Fumito Ueda, it's where I clicked on a file simply called "ICO Plot/Story Guide" and found myself on the first of Peter Eliot's hundred-plus page thesis.

I will be the first to say that quantity of writing has very little relation to quality. Unless you're Noah Caldwell-Gervais, it's exceptionally difficult to write tens of thousands of words on a video game and have it all be purposeful and on-topic. My scripts, for example, are usually eight-to-10 pages; more than that and I start to wander. *But,* this essay was published in 2004, far before I even thought about optimal lengths of essays, and what really captured my imagination wasn't simply the length, but the *topic*.

A hundred pages on sheer gameplay theory was easy; **I read knife-only walkthroughs of _Resident Evil 4_ that were twice that length.**[3] So, too, was writing that dealt with "solving" a plot. In my "secret seekers" video, I mentioned an FAQ that questioned everything from the size of Wander's horse to the genetic lineage of Mono and her baby. These were essentially the forerunners to the "ENDING — EXPLAINED!" videos that now make up the GDP of a small country on YouTube.

Eliot's writing wasn't either of these. Really, it couldn't have been. *ICO* is a powerfully antithetical work to these kinds of analyses. It is *radically* simple, with basic controls, elementary combat, and all of a paragraph of spoken dialogue. **There's no min-maxed gameplay ideal of _ICO_**[4] and little to grab onto in the realm of wild theories. Instead, Eliot latches onto and attempts to explain the true core of the game: why do you *feel* so goddang much while you play it?

It's staggering to me that, 12 years after I last read it, I still remember ideas from Eliot's essay incredibly clearly.

```
"People erect buildings in order to domesticate the environment--to
make a domain of comfort and convenience out of an uncomfortable,
inconvenient wilderness.  But this castle almost seems to exist
```

2

There used to be a *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* arcade machine at my local ice-skating rink. I always looked forward to playing the game far more than skating. I never played against another human, but had a great time blasting away at CPU opponents as Cable. Even after I bought the game on PlayStation 2, I never learned how to do anything more complex than continue shooting opponents with Cable's gun. Somehow, that used PS2 game is now worth more than $200 — I'll never sell!

3

I've always loved learning about challenge runs of a game. Back in the mid-aughts, I had to *read* about the lunacy of playing through *Resident Evil 4* with only a handgun and knife or completing *Ocarina of Time* without picking up any heart containers. Nowadays, these same types of challenges enjoy a thriving scene on YouTube. I think I enjoy them so much because challenge runs don't feel that dissimilar to my style of in-depth analysis — they're both an attempt to understand a game as thoroughly as possible, just from different directions.

4

This isn't entirely true — *ICO* has almost 200 speedruns logged on *Speedrun.com*, with the fastest completion time under 90 minutes. No matter how soft and poetic the game, players will find a way to push it to its limits.

5

I was much more explicitly architecture-focused in my first few years of writing — I wrote on Ueda's world design, *NaissanceE's* endless structure, schools designed for anticipated shootings. In recent years, my topics haven't been as overtly architectural. But almost all of my work still highlights the poetics of digital space, the feeling of existing within a constructed world. This, too, is writing about architecture.

6

This is a fundamental pillar of my writing style. To show passion and sincerity is to make yourself vulnerable — if you're not doing that, why would anyone care what you have to say?

```
to make life miserable...To move through the castle the children
must outwit it-- must meet and prevail against every challenge
this dangerous maze throws at them.  But wait a moment here.
"Outwitting" the castle almost sounds as if we were treating it
as a person.  In fact it very much sounds like the castle has
assumed an adversarial role against the children. And it has."
```

I mean??? Is this not me?? Half of my dang library of work is talking about the idea of hostile architecture and **Eliot just throws it out in Chapter 5?**[5]

Equally entrancing was the way he linked *ICO* with other works, all classics, all undeniably in the canon. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Stoker's *Dracula*, even *Citizen Kane* for Pete's sake. And it wasn't the gaming-inferiority-complex style comparison, insisting that *ICO* was "just as much art as any of these works." Instead, that idea is implicit; as impossible as it sounds, his linking *ICO's* conclusion to *Citizen Kane's* is unpretentious. In his writing, they are simply two artistic works with thematic parallels. Again, if you're familiar with my work, this influence should be clear.

But most of all, what connected me to Eliot's essay was his refusal to act as some detached observer. In a powerful rejection of a "the kids actually die at the end!" reading of the finale of *ICO*, he invokes not only the thematic and narrative weight lost in this interpretation but also his own faith. He talks about how false this understanding of an afterlife rings based on what he understands and believes. And while I'm certainly not a Christian, nor do I spend a lot of time thinking about afterlives, Eliot's passion is enormously compelling. He understands that the way he, the way *everyone*, interprets art is a conversation between the piece and his own lived experience. Eliot doesn't pretend that he was born in a test tube and as such can objectively assess its value. **His reading of *ICO* makes him vulnerable, and that was remarkable to me.**[6] It still is.

A couple months ago, I had the pleasure of being interviewed for HeavyEyed's video, "How We Talk About Games." It's a look back at the critical games discussion that had shaped my, his, and many other video makers' style; it's what got me thinking about Eliot's piece again in the first place. However, neither I nor HeavyEyed actually get the best line in the video. That goes to another voice who you might be familiar with: Razbuten.

```
"I think for a while, there were a lot of people trying to find
that thing under the stone that no one had talked about, right?
For any given game … what that actually is is perspective…"
```

The thing about writing about games is it's so easy, and often incentivized, to be boring. And usually it's practical boring-ness! The writing is to a point, and it expresses that point. But still: the vast majority of words I've read about games in my life can probably be sorted into two categories: previews and reviews. "What this game might be like," and "What this game is like."
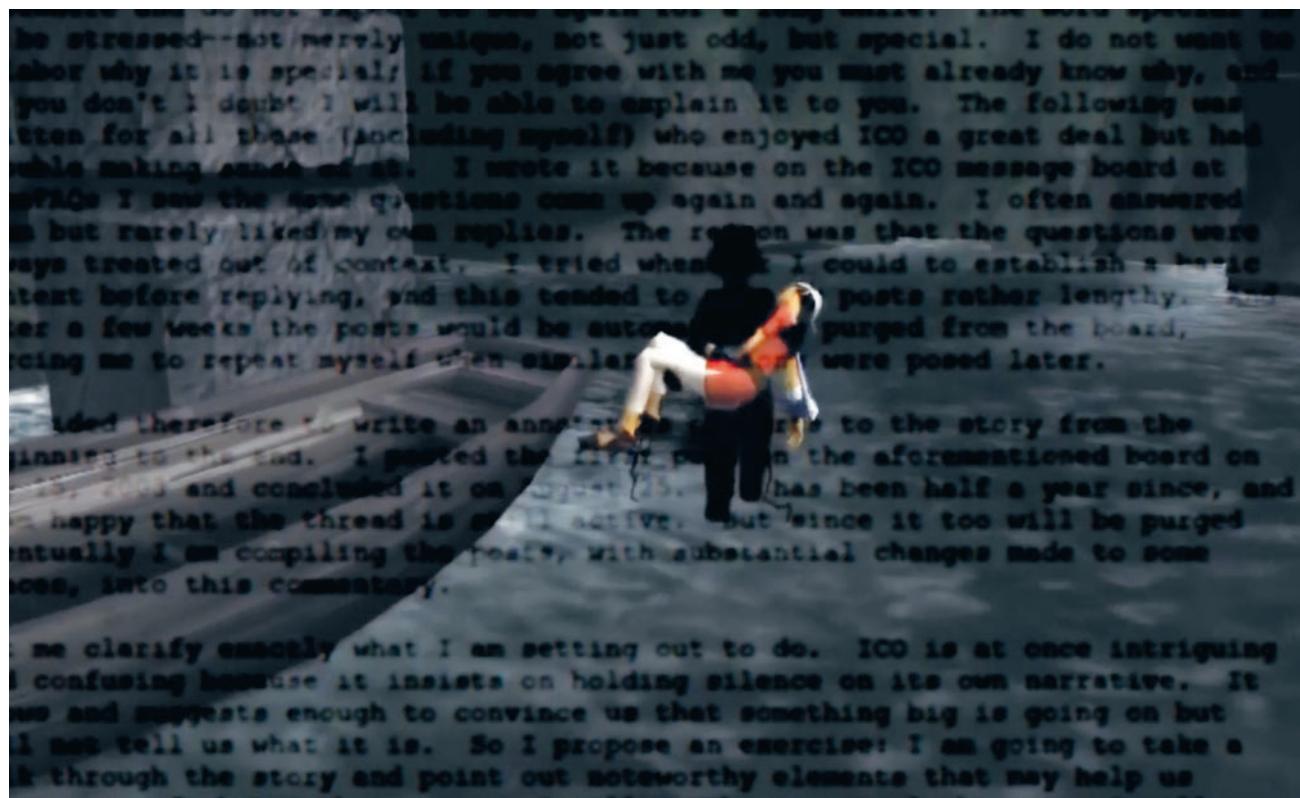
I've written a couple previews in my life. It is not a flexible format. Meaningful criticism of the game, positive or negative, comes off as punching down; you're playing an incomplete project, and besides, things could change before release! What could you understand by seeing four minutes of a movie, or two square inches of a photograph? So instead, it comes down to the basest form of interaction: **do the guns feel good, y/n.**[7]

A review, of course, has the chance to do much more. A full look at the game, a more holistic understanding (even if that "full look" has to be exhaustedly typed out after playing the game for many sleepless nights). Fantastically written reviews come out every day — check out Julie Muncy's review of *The Last of Us 2* for example, an incisive look at the game's themes made even more impressive by the fact that reviewers literally weren't allowed to talk about half of it.

BUT, reviews — especially when coming from an outlet with a wide audience — run into the same fundamental problem as previews. By and large, the reason we go to reviews is to tell us whether to buy the game or not. And *boy* is this limiting.

I'm going to give you an example of a review that would not help me decide if I wanted to buy a game or not. It's a review of the iOS game *Infinity Blade*, written by J. Nicolas Geist in 2011. It starts like this:

```
"Infinity Blade is a game about iteration, about retreading old
ground, about the small changes that surface across endless
repetitions."
```

7

Public-facing previews contrast interestingly with another style of pre-release games writing I've done: consulting. Consultants are brought in before a game releases to (among other things) help the studio get an idea of the public reception to a game. In these situations, consultants are encouraged to be critical! The studio wants to know if its characters lack charm, quests are boring, or combat is unbalanced. Yet when writing public previews, there's often an unspoken pressure to avoid criticizing these same elements, since the game is still in development.

Since it's impossible to accurately judge a full game's appeal based on an in-progress snapshot, my favorite previews tend to focus on the metanarrative of a game's pitch and marketing, rather than the game itself.

PRESERVED, FOR NOW

I should have mentioned where I first learned about Geist's review, both to give credit to the recommender and because it's a fascinatingly layered instance of historical preservation. Geist's review of *Infinity Blade* is lauded by writer Gavin Craig in "DED LED," a free compilation of 2013-2016 writing from former online games outlet *Kill Screen*. *Kill Screen* was, at one time, a vibrant hub of creative and intellectual games writing — this book features no less than four former *Kill Screen* contributors (pages 46. 112, 128, 186). That version of the site died through a combination of corporate mishandling and general organizational changes, and now I have to read references to near-dead game reviews in the preserved pages of other near-dead game reviews. At the time of writing, "DED LED," *Kill Screen*'s original archives, and Geist's review of *Infinity Blade* are all still available online. Let's hope they stay that way.

I didn't read this review when it was originally published; nor when I was trying to decide if I should purchase *Infinity Blade*. Up until the point that I read this, **I hadn't thought about the game in years.**[8] I found this piece of writing because I saw someone else mention a review that was broken due to JavaScript updates, and I was too curious to ignore it. Geist describes the central conceit of the game: challenging The God King, dying, and then the next generation taking up your sword. It's a short review, just over a dozen sentences. But at the bottom of the page, there's a button that says "Begin Bloodline 2."

```
"Infinity Blade is a game about cosmetics, about superficial
changes to the way things look. My new helmet is more gothic
than my old helmet. My new sword has a fire effect instead of
an ice effect."
```

The text of the review itself begins to change, not all at once, but like a stream, words trickling around existing sentences, pushing some out of the way and surrendering to others. It loses parts of the criticism that existed in the first bloodline. It gains new insights, explores new lines of thinking. It ends the same way:

```
"But to continue playing is to live the same life a little bit better,
a little bit smarter, a little bit longer than the time before."
```

Changes start to happen faster. The opening paragraph can't decide on itself, the following won't settle on if it's noble or wretched to die like our fathers, the last line remains the same. Geist's review ebbs and flows, reflects and looks forward. The "bloodlines" of the review aren't a gimmick; the way they parallel the game's halting progression grounds the review's profundity, making digestible what could be completely opaque. It *is* talking about *Infinity Blade*. But at the same time, like the best art criticism can do, it's showing that art in context and in conversation with the world around it.

Advocates for so-called "objective" games criticism often balk at the idea of bringing external context to a review. **Judging a game on its own merits, the argument goes, cannot coexist with the acknowledgment of the world outside its virtual walls.**[9]

Nothing could be further from the truth. The game was not written, designed, nor programmed in a vacuum. It will not be played in one. To restrict yourself to the

---

8

That being said, I did play a *lot* of *Infinity Blade* (as well as its sequels) as a teen, largely on that previously mentioned bar mitzvah iPod Touch. The entire Infinity Blade series is now unavailable, turned into abandonware by the ceaseless march of iOS updates. Games like this represent a weird void in my gaming history. I spent hundreds of hours playing games from the App Store — *Infinity Blade*, *Cartoon Wars 2*, *Flight Control*. Similar to the hundreds of free online Flash games I was raised on, these defunct App Store games now exist only as vague memories, largely unplayable without emulation.

9

A lot of this feels a little basic — in most essays, I would trust my audience to know that demands for "objective" criticism are objectively ridiculous. However, this essay is really staking a claim on the purposes and techniques of writing about art, so I'm aiming a little broader with my arguments than usual. Everyone needs to be prompted by *something* to think more deeply about criticism — this essay includes both the pieces that prompted me, and attempts to be that prompt for new audiences.

game's text and the text alone, to refuse to interact with the world that it was molded, formed, and consumed in, *that* is what limits us.

Look. I get it. Sometimes you just want to know if the guns feel better in *Doom Eternal* or if they feel worse. You want to know if the larger arenas make the combat flow better, or if they stilt it. You want to know if you'll get $60 of enjoyment out of your time, **or if you'll wish you bought *Florence* for 20 of your best friends instead.**[10] Those kinds of reviews will still be around, I promise.

But here's what I want to try and convince you of. You know that feeling, when you finish *Doom Eternal* and a sweet guitar shreds over the end credits, and you feel...empty? Like, you had a good time the entire way through, there wasn't much you'd change, and yet there's still that gnawing voice in the back of your head that says, "Yeah, what now? What was the point of all this?"

Great criticism is the answer to that voice. Understanding a piece of art — not as a simple solitary object, but as part of our world — makes everything feel like it means something, no matter how grand or tiny. This may sound like I'm giving games undue prestige; I'm not. Most games are silly, dumb, fleeting. This is about giving to yourself.

I lost countless hours to *Infinity Blade,* played on my iPod Touch under the desk in Algebra 2. I enjoyed them all. I thought critically about none. Geist's review retroactively changed the way those hours exist in my memory. Those endless generations fit into a larger narrative, **those lost hours are, in a way, found again.**[11]

In an essay titled "Games Criticism is a Kindness," Harper Jay writes:

```
Criticism understands that most of the games we play and movies
we watch are not world-shaking. They are not toppling regimes,
redefining our understanding of art, or creating spiritual
movements. It cares if a thing is "good" or "bad" or "important"
only insofar as it can understand what it is doing to earn
those qualities. It treats games seriously irrespective of these
qualities. It does so knowing the inherent fragility of the
medium and the limited impact of most works. It highlights
the beautiful, rejects the banal and does so explicitly from
a position of kindness. The dumpster diver returns from the
cultural heap and finds that one man's trash really is another
man's treasure. Sometimes, it becomes their treasure. It becomes
a thing that changes them forever."[12]
```

The "practical" forms of writing about games, the airy previews and workmanlike reviews, serve a role. They serve it well. And after you've decided to spend your money, after you roll credits on the game they convinced you to buy, they're gone, vanished into that same emptiness that exists within you as the credits roll.

Deciding to buy and play a game should be the beginning of your critical conversation with it, not the end. Good writing will *extend* that conversation.

10
You really should buy *Florence* for 20 of your friends. They'll cry, then thank you for it.

11
As someone who struggles with the seeming conflict between "Games-as-Art" and "Games-as-short-term-Dopamine-injections," this is an important line for me. Even when I enjoy a game as "mindless" entertainment, I still want to know why it *works* as mindless entertainment. We all have the impulse to passively consume — that's what I'm trying to fight.

12
This was the penultimate piece of writing Jay did for *Kotaku* before mostly leaving the games press behind in favor of a community manager job at a game studio. Part of the tragedy of games writing is that, since it's so unstable and underpaid, very few people stay in the industry more than a handful of years. When they leave, we don't just lose their current-day expertise, we also lose all the potential writing they *could* have given us. I absolutely understand why people get out of games writing; it just makes me sad.

13

Hey, that sounds like the name of the book!

14

The Beginner's Guide is my favorite game of all time. For years, I was reluctant to write about it at length in an essay, scared of somehow diminishing its power. I settled for this brief reference to its remarkable impact on me. Only recently did I get over this fear and include it in my 2024 essay "Art for No One."

15

This was a piece written for *Waypoint*, another site that — like *Kill Screen* — briefly featured electrifyingly good games writing before succumbing to the unjust death of corporate mismanagement.

It seems like every few months, we have the same conversation about game reviews: should they factor hour count into their assessment? Is a 100-hour game inherently better for the money than a two-hour one because you get this much entertainment per dollar? I, as expected, don't like this idea. I don't judge my favorite TV shows on number of episodes, my favorite songs on their runtime. While I understand the desire to stretch one's money as far as possible, this equation just seems like another way to throw the dial all the way toward games-as-product.

I have an alternative proposition, although even more impossible to implement. **What is the hour count that a game lives in your memory?**[13] How often do you think of it, reference it, dream about it?

With the first measure, the worth of Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* isn't particularly high. A game that lasts an hour and a half and costs $10 has a utility of basically six bucks an hour, which isn't great. But if that utility includes every time I've thought about *The Beginner's Guide*, every time it's influenced my writing, **every time I've closed my eyes and seen that tower, its worth is incalculable.**[14]

Sometimes, you will simply have that experience with a game. You encounter it, connect almost spiritually, emerge enlightened. But often, at least for me, lending a work of art part of your brain to live in only happens *because* of a brilliant piece of writing. *ICO's* castle has occupied my subconscious for over a decade *because* of how Eliot illuminated its haunting beauty.

More recently, Carolyn Petit's piece "Broken People, Broken Worlds" on, again, *The Last of Us 2* will likely function the same way. I came out of that game tired, angry, confused. But when I read her musings on games as a dream space, I feel a little more settled. Her writing helps me understand where my own thoughts may lie years from now.

Yussef Cole's essay "White Supremacy, Black Liberation, and the Power Dynamics of Gun Violence,"[15] functions similarly, though less cerebral and more historical. It grounds the character relationships of *Mafia III* in an essential conversation about power dynamics, and it does so *so powerfully* that it essentially has reframed the entire way I view the game — and makes it feel more essential with each passing day.

It's a vanishingly rare game that I feel like I "get" right away. But reading other people's expressions of their experiences, their analyses, and conclusions is more than just a shortcut to understanding. A good piece of writing functions as a guide, showing you a path to walk, by which you might come to your own destination with the game.

But you can keep going! Commodity isn't the end of the conversation with a piece of art, and analysis isn't the end-all-be-all of writing about it. Both of these are just fragments of infinite potential when it comes to this kind of work, and what excites me with games writing is we're just starting to use that potential.

Gazing out at
*Metal Gear Solid
V*'s depiction of
Afghanistan

The best piece of writing that's sorta about video games I've ever read is a short story published December 30 of last year in *The New Yorker*, simply called **"Playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*," by Jamil Jan Kochai.**[16] It starts like this:

"First, you have to gather the cash to preorder the game at the local GameStop, where your cousin works, and, even though he hooks it up with the employee discount, the game is still a bit out of your price range because you've been using your Taco Bell paychecks to help your pops, who's been out of work since you were ten, and who makes you feel unbearably guilty about spending money on useless hobbies while kids in Kabul are destroying their bodies to build compounds for white businessmen and warlords – but, shit, it's Kojima, it's Metal Gear, so, after scrimping and saving (like literal dimes you're picking up off the street), you've got the cash…"

Kochai's piece bears no resemblance to a review nor to an "analysis" in the way we typically think of them. It's written in prose, jagged but beautiful, slipping between realities.

"Sneaking along the dirt roads, past the golden fields and the apple orchards and the mazes of clay compounds, you come upon the house where your father used to reside, and it is there – on the road in front of your father's home – that you spot Watak, your father's sixteen-year-old brother, whom you recognize only because his picture (unsmiling, head shaved, handsome, and sixteen forever) hangs on the wall of the room in your home where your parents pray, but here he is, in your

16
Selecting excerpts from Kochai's story proved challenging, both because the whole story is exceptionally written and because it's written in run-on sentences that don't provide easy stopping points for quotes. This style gives the story a breathless quality and aids its blurring of reality and game, but I'm not sure how well I was able to communicate that with these snippets.

Earlier in this essay, I wrote about how good games writing can guide you to an understanding you couldn't find before. This is especially valuable for *Metal Gear Solid V* (*MGSV*), an infamously unfinished game that is meant to conclude a series and yet lacks even a conclusion for its own narrative. Kochai's writing barely interacts with the explicit story of *MGSV* — instead, he uncovers a narrative implicit in the setting and verbs of the game. When viewing the game through Kochai's context, it doesn't sting quite as much that the entire final act of *MGSV* is missing.

```
game, and you press Pause and you set down the controller, and
now you are afraid."
```

In "Playing *Metal Gear Solid V*," the protagonist's world melts into the map, and the world of the game. His foggy childhood memories of Afghanistan, his imaginings of his father's previous life, his picture of the family he's never met, flow freely within the digital walls of *The Phantom Pain*. My own memories of the game come back too, confused and unsure by the strength of Kochai's writing. Do I remember an apple orchard? Was there a house where someone could live? Did I carefully wait outside like he does, or did I kick in the door, guns blazing? The main character's trance-like state leads to my own.

```
You look out the window and see your brother walking toward the
house in the dark and you realize that you've been playing for
too long.

You're blinking a lot.

Too much.
```

The tightrope that this story walks seems impossible. It is, simultaneously, written for people intimately familiar with *Metal Gear Solid V*, people who have never played a video game before, and for the author alone. It is *so intensely personal*, it's almost overwhelming — there should be a warning before you're so viscerally transplanted into someone else's head.

Through these couple thousand words, <mark>*Metal Gear Solid V* gains a weight that all the codec calls and musical interludes in the world couldn't communicate to me.</mark>[17] The relevance of Afghanistan as a locale, the people you're asked to tranquilize or kill outright, the physical and emotional weight of a map included in the game box. Experiencing *MGSV* through these eyes is like seeing a different game from the one exhaustedly dissected, combed through for clues and flaws, and extrapolated to what could have been. These pages mean that, when I return to *Metal Gear Solid V*, it won't be with the disappointment of what the game lacks. It'll be with...

Kochai's story ends, not with a summation of his feelings on *Metal Gear Solid V* or even a concrete conclusion to the story of finding his family in the game. It ends with you — as the protagonist — as Snake, taking

BAD POETRY IS ART, TOO

The final lines of Peter Eliot's *ICO* guide have had more influence on my perspective than perhaps any other piece of writing. He turns his gaze towards if video games qualify as art, a topic now so over-discussed I take it as a given. But early on in my development, I needed someone to spell it out for me. In 2004, Peter Eliot wrote:

"[This] is my problem with all this heated debate over whether video games constitute an art form. People speak as if they were bestowing some great honor upon games by calling them art. But art is a value-neutral term … None will deny that poetry is an art, and a much respected art. But is there such a thing as bad poetry? Of course there is. In fact an enormous portion of it is unreadable. So when we declare poetry an art form we are not really paying poetry as a whole any compliment. Like most creations, art can be wonderful or terrible or merely mediocre … a gamer who praises the art of *ICO*, or the art of any other titles for that matter, ought to remember that far superior art of similar kinds abounds outside the field of gaming. Else he may risk the nearsightedness of a child who thinks himself a fine poet because he is versed in nursery rhymes."

the sort of action inherent to games, a crossing of a threshold, a pass-through liminal space. And although the words stop at the bottom of that page, the feeling of the piece continued unabated in my head for days.

"Playing *Metal Gear Solid V*" is **written in second person.**[18] For a couple pages it hints at what you do, how you feel, and then, quickly and unexpectedly, it leaves you to figure out who that person is. It gives you a specific, intimate story, expands it to a game, and then pushes you forward so you can reorient your whole universe of what *Metal Gear Solid* can be.

Much like games, not every piece of writing will connect with every person. Of course it won't. But when you find that *one*, the words you've been looking for but couldn't find, it feels like unearthing a vital piece of yourself. And each time you expand your own perspective through someone else's insights, the process gets a little easier and feels a little more natural, and then maybe these ways of appreciating art that seemed so distant and unreachable get closer, a little bit at a time, and art itself feels a little less alien too, and then you find yourself in a world where everything, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, can have meaning through the skills you've learned from the others who can do this weird, subjective, wonderful thing.

At least that's what happened to me.

18
A lot of games writing is written, at least partially, in second person — many of my own essays frequently describe what "you" do in a game. But much of that usage is casual to the point of thoughtlessness, and at worst can distance the author from the subjectivity of their own experience. This story's intentionality in using second person makes me want to reconsider my own usage of it.

THE IMMINENT FUTURE OF REPORTING ON GAMES

By Blake Hester

BLAKE HESTER

(he/him)

Blake Hester is a senior editor at Lost In Cult, where he helps oversee editorial across a range of projects. Before that, he helped lead freelance and features at *Game Informer* and wrote for a variety of outlets as a freelancer, including *Polygon*, *Vice*, and *Kill Screen*. He's also the co-host of Something Rotten with Jacob Geller.

Jacob's essay isn't really about the future of writing about games. It's about the future of game criticism. As such, it's a prescient piece; he sees the writing on the wall, he calls it like it is. But if it's about the future of writing about games, it's leaving out major swaths of the entire medium: reporting, features, news, et cetera. And look; I understand "The Future of Writing About Games" is a better, more broadly appealing title than "The Future of Writing Criticism About Games." I'm being pedantic, but also, I'm the editor of this book and that's my job. And so, in keeping with the spirit of the original piece, my contribution here is not about the future of writing about games, either. It's about the future of reporting on games. Or the lack thereof. And to start, I need to bite the hand that feeds.

Like I said, I'm the editor of *How A Game Lives*; I work at Lost In Cult, the book's publisher. I love my job. I think we make amazing, beautiful products that will stand the test of time and celebrate the history of games as an art form in justifiably ornate ways. A decade into my career, I'm happier than I've been in a long time.

And it was never supposed to be like this.

> **"I thought I'd always be a game journalist because I came up at the tail end of an era when, if you got lucky, that's what you *could always* be."**

Up until I lost my previous job in February 2024[1], I was a game journalist. In fact, against my better judgment, from 2015 to early 2024, I'd say this was my defining trait. I wrote longform features, profiles, oral histories, reports, and the like about the game industry and the people who make games. I did it for all the major players — *Polygon*, *Vice*, *Game Informer*, *Kill Screen*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, the list goes on. I thought I'd always be a game journalist because I came up at the tail end of an era when, if you got lucky, that's what you *could always* be. No matter how lubricated the press-to-PR pipeline got, I'd never jump ship like the other traitors. I was a game journalist. Until I wasn't.

For everything I love about Lost in Cult, as an organization, it's the exact opposite of what I ever wanted to do: many of our books are official products; we work with developers and publishers directly. We're not journalists; our works are not objective. They are filtered through reams of public relations and communications teams to make a game and its development look as appealing as possible. To our credit, I think we're clear about this and it isn't unique to us, but it's still not what I thought I'd ever do even a year ago. Because I was a journalist. Now I'm not.

I'm not because there was no future left for me. The future of writing about the game industry is dying. I'm sure plenty of people still working in the game press will disagree, but the front pages of the sites they work for don't tell lies. Go look. Guides, commerce, movies. Anything but. Everything but.

This reality is because of a confluence of factors — an uninterested audience, changes in how people consume news, the decimation of the media landscape post-2020, most recently AI, and so on. I don't hold

it against any specific person at any specific site for shifting attention away from interesting and important writing towards SEO grabs, lists, and guides to survive. That's always been the game, really. It's just worse now than it's ever been.

And obviously, there is plenty of crucial reporting still happening about the game industry, specifically about labor issues and abuses of power. That sect has been especially strong in the last five years, and it's helping us understand the fundamental flaws of the game industry better every day. Though it sometimes feels like there's a monopoly on who gets to write these stories, I don't want to take away from the great work of people like Rebekah Valentine, Nicole Carpenter, and Chris Bratt, who I think are some of the greatest working reporters right now.

But also, importantly, reporting shouldn't be specific to when things are bad. The game industry *is* fundamentally flawed, the AAA space *is* largely evil, and things *are* getting worse by the minute — and yet this being the current primary focus of game reporting paints an inaccurate picture of the industry as a whole. There's a noticeable lack of interesting and diverse stories compared to, say, even five years ago as sites shift focus — or close down.

What I miss are the profiles, the features, the in-depth stories that were probably too long for the internet but were published anyway. What I miss is *writing* about the game industry. For as crucial as labor reporting is, it's not pushing writing as an art form. I miss work where the written word was the point.

Strong writing is not just for entertainment — obviously. Like all art, it is the lens through which we view the

---

1 In the middle of writing this, my old employer, *Game Informer*, was unceremoniously shut down by its parent company, GameStop. Which, in terms of this essay's thesis, is as depressingly poetic an event as I'll ever get. RIP *Game Informer*. Fuck GameStop.

"We are losing out on so many stories, so much knowledge, so much history."

world. Strong features writing about games helps us understand the industry to which we've devoted, if not our lives, at least our attention. Profiles of creators add context to their work. Stories about the real places where they come from explain the fictional places they create. Doing the damn work of interviewing 50 people about how they made a game 25 years ago — even when the development was positive! — tells us our history. This is *so* fucking important to understanding video games not just as an industry, not just as an art form, but as a part of the world in which we all live. This is nonfiction writing, reporting, and journalism 101. This is what is dying.

And so, what do we do to save it? I … don't know. One solution seems to be the in-house journalism trend of the PlayStation and Xbox blogs, developer diaries, and well, outlets like Lost In Cult. The Double Fine documentaries, *Double Fine Adventure* and *PsychOdyssey*, from 2PlayerProductions, an internal team at Double Fine now on the Microsoft payroll, are the greatest documentations of video game development ever made (not to mention the most watchable). Some of my favorite recent developer profiles come from *Slitterhead* developer Bokeh Game Studios' YouTube channel. I couldn't tell you the last piece of really great, longform feature writing I read and loved by a game journalist. It's been a while. I used to read it weekly. I used to check a certain site Monday through Friday, every day at noon because that was when it published its new features. I don't go to many game sites anymore. I go to official YouTube channels. Is that the solution? It can't be.

What I mourn is that the career I and others got to have — one of immense privilege, I know — is dying, ever quicker as the years go on. I value the reporting we still get but the thoughtful, interesting, hell, sometimes even experimental features writing of years past about the game industry, the people who play games, and especially the people who make games, is disappearing. It's not that good writers don't exist, or that they don't want to write meaningful journalism about video games. It's that the press industry won't provide for them anymore. We have our five to ten big-name journalists and that's that. Everything else is guides, lists, and stuff hardly worth thinking about.

As such, we are losing out on so many stories, so much knowledge, so much history. We're losing out on just reading good-ass writers writing good-ass stories — sometimes the subject is secondary to the craft! When that's gone, we don't have a good replacement. In-house journalism, no matter how good (and to be clear, the aforementioned 2PlayerProductions is as good as it gets) still isn't — and never, *ever* will be — a replacement for journalism, nor can it be fully trusted. In 2024, Sony had to apologize for *making up quotes* in an official interview with *The Last of Us* director Neil Druckmann. And so, even though I love my current job, I desperately hope someone takes my former place as a journalist. But sadly, I don't know if anyone will. Content like guides and walkthroughs need to be written. SEO needs to be hit. These are the priorities now because algorithms tell us it's what audiences want. As sites close down, as publishers delete work, as CMSs change, our history disappears, breaks, and is forgotten.

What do we do to save it? Can we save it? I don't have an answer — not yet, at least. But people are trying to fill those voids.

I want to believe in the new sites coming up, such as the reader-supported *Aftermath*. I want to see that model take over the traditional ad-based model we've (dangerously) relied on for decades. I have my reservations — sites require *so* much money, people, legal teams, et cetera that large-scale operations seem doubtful — but on the other hand, outside of games, sites like *Defector* have proved interesting, successful, and shockingly large in terms of headcount. Maybe that's the future. We won't know for years.

Jacob's essay beautifully talks about his love of specific pieces of game criticism. It's the kind of writing about writing that makes me, a writer, excited to read said writing. He relates **reading great criticism**[2] to "unearthing a vital piece of yourself." The writing I miss allows us to do the same, but also to unearth vital pieces of the artists we love and the games we cherish. We can't let that disappear forever. It's our moral imperative (and I'm not just talking about game journalism anymore) to retain the history we've already published for future generations and to continue archiving, cataloging, and telling that history. It's our moral imperative to do so in a way that inspires others — through the beauty of excellent writing — to do the same.

Can we save it? I don't know. But we have to try.

2 If you want my two cents: while I think the major game sites have largely abandoned interesting game criticism, plenty of small sites still consistently publish great work. *Unwinnable*, *Into The Spine*, and *Bullet Points Monthly* are obvious examples, though new sites like *Aftermath* are also putting in the work. For my money, and not just because a sizable portion of that money comes from Jacob, I think YouTube has been the best place for games crit for nearly ten years now and I'm constantly excited by the platform. There are mainstays like Noah Caldwell-Gervais, Tim Rogers, and of course, Jacob, but also newer voices such as ThorHighHeels, Thegamingmuse, AesirAesthetics, Tangomushi, and so on. It's a great time to be a game crit fan, imo!

A CONVERSATION WITH JACOB GELLER AND BLAKE HESTER

On September 5, 2024, Jacob Geller sat down with *How a Game Lives* editor, Blake Hester, to discuss the process of creating the book. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Blake Hester: Jacob, you're a YouTuber. Did you know that? I bring that up because you don't strike me as someone — despite building a career, a respectable living on the platform — as someone with a particular affinity for the platform you work on. Would you say that's true?

Jacob Geller: YouTube's helped me do a lot of things … but yeah, I'm not running out and singing its praises.

BH: In the intro to your book, you talk about how you have to relinquish your power to the platform. You make your work, and then it's kind of out there, and you can't control it.

JG: I mean, that's true of anything. When I release this book, I won't be able to keep changing things in it. But it does feel like YouTube sculpts a video's context way more because the platform just controls everything about it, other than literally what is in the video.

BH: You wrote that you've made the book for the explicit reason that you can't control YouTube.

JG: It would be really hard to delete the book. All my videos could just disappear one day. But someone would have to go and get every copy of the book if they wanted to destroy it.

BH: What if every library burned down?

JG: That would be terrible. My book would not be the concern.

BH: YouTube has been around a long time. It's no longer "Charlie bit my finger" and the monkey pissing in its own mouth. Which, let's be clear, is amazing. Have you seen the monkey pissing? [laughing] I love YouTube, man. But

people like yourself have built work that is important. Your work is taught.

JG: Yeah, there is…an oeuvre, or whatever.

BH: Exactly. Do you think it's important for yourself and others to create something like *How a Game Lives* to immortalize work, to kind of take ownership over it, because you're never going to own YouTube?

JG: Yeah, I think so. The videos are still vital, to be clear. A lot of my "storytelling" happens visually. But, not infrequently, people ask me for a script so they can cite it — I think citing a YouTube video still seems like a kinda unprofessional thing to do. And so even for historical purposes, being able to write "Jacob Geller said in his essay on modern art, *How a Game Lives*, page 10," as opposed to including some YouTube link that hopefully still works, means a lot to me. It feels like my writing is more legitimate.

BH: You personally added 20,000 words of just annotations, which is, I would say, frankly above and beyond the call to action. Can we talk about going through your old work and remembering what you did?

JG: Watching old stuff is a little excruciating for me just because of the poor production. There's a moment where my audio got better, and before that, I don't watch them.

But the thing is, reading the scripts was actually kind of affirming. I think I've gotten to be a better writer, but I don't read my old stuff and cringe in the same way as I do at my old production issues. And sometimes I think as I've aged into this job, my format has gotten a little more rigid; maybe I've just decided what it is that I do. Some

of those earlier essays feel much more experimental because I hadn't figured out exactly what the "Jacob Geller vibe" was.

BH: What is the Jacob Geller vibe? "I think about it a lot." Is that the vibe?

JG: I think that is the uniting principle. "I think about it a lot."

BH: The first essay of yours that I watched, as I'm sure was the case for a lot of people, was the *Shadow of the Colossus* video, which was — would you say was your first one that kind of blew up?

JG: Undeniably.

BH: So, now, at this point in your career, with much success under your belt, what was it like returning to that inflection point of your writing?

JG: That video was so interesting because it is not really the type of video I make.

BH: It's almost reporting, really. It's not even "almost" – you reported it out.

JG: Yeah. And I could see, after doing that, feeling like, "Okay, now I have to find another community that did a thing for a long time," you know? I remember thinking "There's a *Minecraft* server that's been running for ten years, and maybe I could talk about that." But I think a fortunate point of timing is that the video immediately after *Colossus* was the haunted house video, which is maybe my most vibes-y — it's not "reported" at all. And both of those videos worked. So that reassured me that my audience wasn't only interested in stories like the *Colossus* one.

I think what makes the *Shadow of the Colossus* video good — and what I've tried to take with me through other videos — is it has an emotional arc. In order for the story of the essay to be compelling, we need to understand why the events are emotionally meaningful. And I think that video blew up because I was successful at that. It didn't just tell viewers "This happened, and then this happened." It covered the hopes of a community and how they changed.

BH: How did you decide on which essays would be included in the book?

JG: There were a couple that I just consider defining essays of mine. Even though it's five years old at this point, the modern art essay is one that many people think of as their prototypical Jacob Geller essay.

The included essays definitely skew older. The most recent essay in it is "Art in the Pre-Apocalypse," which at this point is a year old, and will be older when people are reading the book. I wanted the space to have thought about them for a while. When something first releases, I can only see the problems in it — I wanted to kind of have forgotten about the production of each essay a little so that I could experience them fresh and write about them with a more balanced perspective.

BH: Annie, your beautiful partner, designed the book.

JG: She did!

BH: Talk about working with Annie.

JG: It's been great. That was part and parcel with the pitch of the book. When I told Lost in Cult I wanted to do this, I was like, "And I've got a designer." I thought, selfishly, that this would keep it much closer to my vision, just because of the literal lack of distance between us. But also, I think Annie understands what I'm looking for, and I completely trust her artistic instincts. There were times early on where she was coming with me with fonts and asking "What do you think about this?" And I was like, "You just choose. I want your take on this in the book more than I want my own because I am not a designer."

BH: Times New Roman, call it a day..

JG: [laughing] Arial! It's been great, especially working out some of the more complex parts. I hope people can tell by reading the book, it is an immense work of design. There is nothing "default" on almost any page. Everything has to have specific decisions made about it, which makes it feel very much like the process of writing or editing a video. And I really like how much thought has gone into all of it. I knew that publishing the essays with these annotations would require so much work that I wanted the ability to work out any issues as soon as they came up. Which is exactly what I did with Annie.

BH: Lost in Cult is a U.K. company, but you're from North Carolina. I'm from the South, too, and I feel like keeping it in-house in that way is such a distinctly Southern thing. Even on something grand, we're like, "No, we're just gonna work with our friends."

JG: One of the biggest conflicts early on in the book is that I said, "We cannot have this be U.K. spellings." Lost in Cult, god bless them, has a house style that includes "colour" with a "u." And I sat down with our very kind book manager and whatever, and I was like, "Look-

BH: Ewan.

JG: "Ewan, you're great." But I said, "We are publishing the essays that I wrote. It seems small, but I can't change these things, because they are word-perfect to what I [wrote], and I didn't say color with a 'u.'" I was surprised at how personal it felt to me and made me realize how possessive I was over the very literal lettering of these essays.

BH: The editing was really interesting because you kind of wanted your blemishes and warts to still be in there. And this is not a fault of yours as a writer. You did not write these to be looked at.

JG: Yeah. I think I write pretty cleanly for YouTube, but I can get away with a lot. Run-on sentences are fine, or just being loosey-goosey with grammar, being more interpretative. I always have the excuse of, "Well, people aren't gonna read it. They're just gonna see me saying it." Or, I always had that excuse. Until now!

BH: How did you curate the list of people that would contribute to the book?

JG: I first kind of put together my dream list, and then thought, "Well, if these people say no, we'll find other people," and then no one said no. So, I did get exactly who I wanted, which is awesome.

A lot of the afterword writers have been very important to my own development. Ian, for instance, who wrote the afterword on the modern art piece — he was probably my single biggest influence when I first started making video essays. Similarly, Noah is one of my favorite video game writers and a huge influence on me, so I just knew I had to have him in here.

Jamil was another interesting inclusion because he is prominently featured in my essay, "The Future of Writing About Games," which you [Blake] wrote the afterword to. But when I approached Jamil about writing something for the book, he asked to work on the Call of Duty one — and he nailed it.

BH: His essay is one of the best things I've ever read. Unbelievable.

I feel like Nana is a very special person to you, and seeing he wrote the foreword felt like a very deliberate choice.

JG: Yeah, if I could give people who are reading this a piece of advice, it would be "Have a National Book Award-nominated writer write the nicest piece of writing anyone ever could about you."

BH: He said you were the future of writing about everything! [laughing] He wrote *Chain-Gang All-Stars*, that's high praise.

JG: No, I know! A part of being on YouTube for me is, I feel worse than every other writer. It feels like every other form of writing is more legitimate in some way. Years ago, I talked about one of his short stories in my video "Time Loop Nihilism." I felt the same way about talking about that story that I feel whenever I talk about an artist, which is, "I hope that I can communicate even a fifth of the spark of your worth to my viewers." But I think he was equally thrilled to see someone in my position talking about his work. And so, now, for years, we have just had this really wonderful mutual admiration.

BH: What about all the artists in the book? How did you pick all those?

JG: A lot of them were, again, artists that I really like and have been thinking about for years. Kilian Eng, who did the cover, I have a *Last Guardian* print of his in my office. It's probably my favorite piece of art that I own. When choosing the cover, I thought, "This is the dream, it probably won't work out." And then he was down for it! Inside the book, I loved the idea of having multidisciplinary artists working in many different mediums — we don't just have talented illustrators, but photographers and even physical painters.

BH: Lost in Cult is a visually-focused company, but also doing a book for a guy who works primarily on YouTube, it feels important to have such impactful art.

JG: I think of this project as a coffee table book even though it's largely just full of words. I want every page to be interesting. A lot of that is the design, and what Annie's doing with the annotations. But when we were figuring out how the art would fit in the book, I pulled out *Akira*. I was like, "Do you see how these splash pages work, where you turn it, and the entire page is this one image, and you're overwhelmed by it? That is what I want the effect on the reader to be."

BH: So, coincidentally — perhaps ironically — the week we're having this conversation, there was this big lawsuit about the Internet Archive. This specific case was Hachette, the publisher, being litigious. Anyway, a lot of work is going away, and we live in hell. But you love libraries. Do you plan to donate this book?

JG: Absolutely. I am more than happy to give copies to whatever libraries want it. Maybe even better than the idea of it being on someone's bookshelf is it being in a library and helping people do research with it or something.

BH: Are you going to put it on the Internet Archive?

JG: Legally, I don't know if I can.

BH: I work at Lost in Cult. I don't care.

JG: Okay. Well, I want it to be on the Internet Archive.

BH: I think that's important, to contribute it in a free sense.

JG: I have written so many essays using books uploaded on the Internet Archive that I otherwise would never have been able to access. I agree, it's vital. I am not nearly as important as any of those books I've done research from, but yeah, I want people to be able to do that with my work as well.

BH: If I can do a slam-dunk connection right now, that's how work lives, right? It's not that someone buys it — if we put this book in Barnes & Noble and people buy it, that's great, but to contribute it to a library, a fucking physical collection of knowledge that people can use, that's huge. And your book is filled with your thoughts and other

people's thoughts. It's great. I think that's important. Don't buy it. Go to your library, come on. Save yourself the money. [laughing]

JG: Blake, thank you for editing the book.

BH: Yeah, no problem.

JG: Was it more than you thought it was going to be in terms of editing?

BH: It was definitely one of the most challenging or intense projects I've taken on, even within Lost in Cult, and all of our books are huge and long and require a lot of text. But when I say it was challenging and intense, I mean that in a good way, because I was excited to work on this. Sometimes at night, I would have to stop myself.

JG: Hey, work-life balance!

BH: Right, exactly. But it was a fun challenge because usually when I'm editing something, if I'm copy-editing, I'm just fixing grammar. And I enjoy that, I love editing, but it's not particularly thrilling work. But with yours, we had to figure out how to present something that was never meant to be looked at. How do you supplement the text with annotations, which is not really a grammatical change, but a content change? And being like, no offense, sometimes being like, "This annotation is boring." [laughs]

JG: No, that's what I need! I don't have an editor on my essays, so it was great to be able to ask, "Is this boring?"

BH: Yeah. So, I guess to answer your question, it was a ton of work. It was really intense to work on, in a way that I think will really show. I've done other work in my career where I felt that it didn't matter whether it was edited or not. But you and I would get on calls and talk about individual words and individual quotations. And then, working with all the contributors was wild. When you're working with such a high caliber of a writer and you fix even just a tiny typo, you're like, "I'm good at my job."

JG: "You're not perfect."

BH: No, it's not even that, it's like, "I could help you. I have something to contribute to you."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Making a video essay is an incredibly solitary pursuit. I write the essay alone, edit it myself, perform the script while shut in my office, edit the video in the same office, and finally release it to the anonymous online masses. It's been a joy to discover that writing a book is nothing like that. The beautiful object you're holding in your hands is the result of countless hours of collaboration, and putting it together has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

CONNER FAWCETT (he/they)
The Golem and the Jewish Superhero

Conner Fawcett is an artist currently helping to illuminate tabletop roleplaying games. Conner has a near-obsessive fascination with the stories told by the people who came before about the things they loved and feared. You can find their work online @badbucket or @thebadbucket depending on the social. Offline you can find them in a tall tree or king-cursed cave.

MAKAYLA HAAG (she/her)
Art in the Pre-Apocolypse

Makayla Haag is a disabled visual artist and curator. Her practice is rooted in a passion for disability justice and explores an array of themes stemming from her lived experience in a disabled body. You can find her and her work @Homebones on Instagram.

LUIS MELO (he/him)
Does Call of Duty Believe In Anything?

Luis Melo is an illustrator from Portugal, born in 1981. Having worked in the video game industry for over 15 years, in Lisbon, Shanghai, and Québec, he decided to change course and become independent. More recently, he also started teaching. Under the alias of Party In The Front, he explores surrealism, pop art, science fiction, fantasy, and music, in the form of posters, illustrations, and animation.

DOUG JOHN MILLER (he/him)
The Decade-Long Quest For Shadow Of The Colossus' Last Secret

Doug John Miller is an illustrator and concept artist currently working in the United Kingdom. Trained as an architect in London where he currently teaches at UCL, his drawings explore stories and experiment with colorful and highly detailed compositions of surreal and fantastical architecture. You can find him at dougjohnmiller.com or @dougjohnmiller.

RIOTBONES (they/them)
The Future of Writing About Games

Riotbones is a queer illustrator and comic artist from the Philippines with a passion for all things haunting, dark, and tender — anything that celebrates the euphoria and the devastation of the human condition. Specializing in narrative work and illustration, they've worked for various clients such as Dark Horse Comics and Natsume Atari but are drawn in particular to storytelling, especially when it comes to horror and fantasy.

KAYLEE ROWENA (she/they)
The Legacy of the Haunted House

Kaylee Rowena is a comic artist and illustrator who loves to tell ghost stories. You can find her at kayleerowena.com, @kayleerowena on most social media, or by shouting into the nearest haunted house and waiting for a reply.

ZOE THOROGOOD (she/her)
Returnal is a Hell of Our Own Creation

Zoe Thorogood is a cartoonist from the UK. She is best known for her autobio comic *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH.* Her work mostly explores themes of mental health and isolation. She loves drawing monsters and things that make her parents worry about her.

ZOE TOLLERTON (she/her)
Every Zelda Is The Darkest Zelda

Zoe Tollerton is a student concept artist and illustrator from the north of England. She can be found under the handle @bigskycastle in most places online.

CARIN WALSH (she/her)
Who's Afraid of Modern Art?

Carin Walsh is a visual artist, exhibit organizer, and museum educator. Her painting, illustration, animation, and audio/video work have been exhibited throughout North Carolina. Walsh splits her time between her work at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and developing her studio practice. She is trained in *Visual Thinking Strategies* and regularly engages viewers in meaningful discussions about art.

SOURCES

Below is a list of sources used in this book. Media and sources explicitly mentioned within the text of an essay are not included.

FOREWORD BY NANA KWAME ADJEI-BRENYAH

On preferences in art

"Sometimes, Academic Writing Hits Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah Emotionally" *The New York Times,* May 14, 2023

WHO'S AFRAID OF MODERN ART

On the destruction and restoration of "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III"

Episode 347: "The Many Deaths of a Painting"
99% Invisible, March 3, 2019

On Jesse Helms

"Jesse Helms: The Intimidation of Art and the Art of Intimidation" by Kriston Capps
The Huffington Post, July 15, 2008

"The Jesse Helms Theory of Art" by Richard Meyer
October, Issue 104, 2003

On Jesse Helms (footnote)

A War for the Soul of America by Andrew Hartman, 2019
Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism by William A. Link, 2008

On the vandalism of a Rothko

"I regret vandalising a Rothko, but I remain committed to Yellowism" by Vladimir Umanets
The Guardian, May 15, 2014

On the Pope and Andres Serrano (footnote)

"When I Met the Pope" by Patricia Lockwood
London Review of Books, November 30, 2023

On Paul Joseph Watson

"Modern Art is STILL Sh*t" by Paul Joseph Watson
YouTube, January 24, 2019

"The Truth About Modern Art" by Paul Joseph Watson
YouTube, January 26, 2016

On the connections between Nazis, the American Right, and modern art

"'The barbarism of representation': The Nazi critique of modern art and the American New Right's Kulturkampf" by Barbara Fischer and Luís Madureira
Patterns of Prejudice, Volume 28, 1994

RETURNAL IS A HELL OF OUR OWN CREATION

On the canceled sequel to *Prey* (footnote)

"The cancelled Prey 2 had an incredible plot twist" by Chris Bratt
Eurogamer, May 25, 2017

On ambiguous endings (footnote)

"Annihilation and Decoding Metaphor" by Folding Ideas
YouTube, October 31, 2018

On *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*'s German port (footnote)

"I have no Mouth and I must scream [Lösung]" by Holger Franke
DLH.net (accessed via Wayback Machine), October 1998

"Germany Will Now Allow Some Nazi Symbols in Video Games. Here's What to Know About the History of That Ban" by Gabby Raymond
Time, August 10, 2018

CONTROL, ANATOMY, AND THE LEGACY OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE

On sentient buildings

"When Buildings Kill" by Keith Eggener
Places, October 2013

On *Anatomy* (footnote)

"Anatomy: The Best Horror Game Ever" by Cool Ghosts
YouTube, May 19, 2016

On yōkai

"Mokumokuren" by Matthew Meyer
Yokai.com, May 31, 2013

DOES CALL OF DUTY BELIEVE IN ANYTHING?

On if Call of Duty is political

"129 Rapid-Fire Questions About Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" by Ben Hanson, *Game Informer*
YouTube, August 7, 2019

"Is Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare A Political Game? Here's Infinity Ward's Answer" by Ben Hanson, *Game Informer YouTube*, August 8, 2019

On Jacob Geller's first review (footnote)

Door Kickers: Action Squad by Jacob Geller
Cane and Rinse, September 28, 2018

On "No Russian"

"'Remember, No Russian:' Critics and Developers Remember Call of Duty's Most Infamous Mission" by Blake Hester and Caty McCarthy
VG247, October 28, 2019

"Modern Warfare 2 designer explains the thinking behind No Russian mission" by Tom Senior
PC Gamer, August 9, 2012

On "The Highway of Death"

"Twenty-five Years Ago: The 1991 Iraq Gulf War, America Bombs the 'Highway of Death'" by Joyce Chediac
Global Research, February 27, 2016

"Call Of Duty Dev Addresses Highway Of Death, Waterboarding, And The Intent Of Its Story" by Tamoor Hussain and Michael Higham
Gamespot, November 1, 2019

"'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare' Rewrites the Highway of Death As a Russian Attack, Rather Than American" by Andrew Whalen
Newsweek, October 28, 2019

On using a fictionalized country

"Why Modern Warfare will use a fictional country for its very realistic conflict" by Charlie Hall
Polygon, September 25, 2019

On *Modern Warfare 3*'s controversial plot elements

"Interview: Modern Warfare 3's creative director discusses blowing up the world" by Sebastian Haley
VentureBeat, November 6, 2011

On "Shell shock" (footnote)

"George Carlin: Doin' It Again" by George Carlin
HBO, March 23, 1990

On real-life soldiers committing crimes

"Military court upholds Michael Behenna's conviction, sentence" by Chris Casteel
The Oklahoman, July 27, 2011

"Army reopens probe into Green Beret, detainee's death after FNC interview" by Barnini Chakraborty
Fox News, December 9, 2016

"Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes" by Dave Philipps
The New York Times (accessed via Wayback Machine), April 23, 2019

"What motivated fellow SEALs to dime out Eddie Gallagher?" by Navy Times staff
Navy Times, Apr 22, 2019

Afterword by Jamil Jan Kochai

On those killed by drone strikes

"Manhunting in the Hindu Kush" by Ryan Devereaux
The Intercept, October 15, 2015

"The Assassination Complex" by Jeremy Scahill
The Intercept, October 15, 2015

On colonial tropes of native and Arabic women

"The Young British Soldier" by Rudyard Kipling
Scots Observer, June 28, 1890

On other casualties of the Bin Laden assassination

"Getting Bin Laden" by Nicholas Schmidle
The New Yorker, August 1, 2011

THE DECADE-LONG QUEST FOR SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS' LAST SECRET

On the search for the secret

"The quest for Shadow of the Colossus' last big secret" by Craig Owens
Eurogamer, February 6, 2018 (originally published in 2013)

On "bricked up" (footnote)

"Bricked Up"
Know Your Meme, March 13, 2023

On *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s Christian imagery (footnote)

"Neon Genesis Evangelion Frequently Asked Questions" by Brendan Jamieson
The Evangelion Otaku Page (accessed via Wayback Machine), January 18, 2005

On exploring out-of-bounds (footnote)

"The Grannies" by Marie Foulston
YouTube, February 11, 2024

Afterword by Chris Plante

On searching

Moby Dick by Herman Melville, 1851

EVERY ZELDA IS THE DARKEST ZELDA

On sneaking pathos into Nintendo games (footnote)

Interview:Super Mario Galaxy Director On Sneaking Stories Past Miyamoto
Wired, December 4, 2007

Afterword by Matt Margini

On avoiding pits in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

"The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time FAQ/Walkthrough" by MrShotgun
GameFAQs, July 26, 2007

On Kamaro's mask in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

"The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask FAQ/Walkthrough" by MrShotgun
GameFAQs, July 26, 2007

On catching the Hylian Loach

"Zelda 64: The Ultimate Fishing Guide" by DaRk_OnE
GameFAQs, February 14, 1999

On the monomyth in The Legend of Zelda

"The Legend of Zelda: The Hero's Journey in Gaming" by GaroXicon
Zelda Dungeon, February 10, 2012

ART IN THE PRE-APOCALYPSE

On *Season: A Letter to the Future* (footnote)

"Scrapbooking at the End of the World in 'SEASON'" by Renata Price
Vice, January 26, 2023

On *Umurangi Generation's* influences

"Urumangi Generation explores 'Indigenous resiliency' and climate change in a cyberpunk setting" by Jonathan Ore
CBC, October 16, 2020

THE GOLEM AND THE JEWISH SUPERHERO

On David Wisniewski (footnote)

"David Wisniewski: Crafting Serious Entertainment" by Nathalie op de Beeck
Publishers Weekly, February 15, 1998

Wisniewski's 1997 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech (footnote)

American Library Association Institutional Repository, 1997

On the cultural legacy of the Golem

The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction by Elizabeth Baer, 2012

On the Golem in cinema (footnote)

Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters by Maya Barzilai, 2016

Many Selves: The Horror and Fantasy Films of Paul Wegener by Henry Nicolella and John T. Soister, 2013

On Hans Poelzig

"Hans Poelzig" by roberts
Architectuul, May 1, 2017

On possible connections to *Frankenstein* (footnote)

"The Role of the Golem in the Making of Frankenstein" by Stephen Bertman
The Keats-Shelley Review, Volume 29, 2015

On Pokémon (footnote)

"Gen 5 Historia: Pokemon Origin Stories (Part 3)" by Dr. Lava
LavaCutContent, May 21, 2019

Afterword by Andrew Geller

On Hanukkah and the *Book of Daniel*

"The Secret Connection Between Hanukkah and the Book of Daniel" by Rachel Scheinerman
My Jewish Learning, December 2, 2022

"The Lead up to Chanukah in the Book of Daniel" by Lawrence M. Wills
TheTorah.com, December 6, 2015

On Antiochus and puns

"Antiochus" by Rabbi Paul Steinberg
My Jewish Learning, March 1, 2009

On the concept of a "heroic death"

"Honoring the Death of Soldiers" by Jacob L. Wright
TheTorah.com, April 19, 2018

On Rabbi Leo Baeck and the essence of Judaism

This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence (introduction) by Albert Hoschander Friedlander, 1955

This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence by Leo Baeck, 1955

"Leo Baeck" by Matt Plen
My Jewish Learning, November 11, 2006

FEAR OF COLD

On freezing to death

"Frozen Alive" by Peter Stark
Outside, January, 1997

On terminal burrowing behavior (footnote)

Terminal burrowing behaviour"—a phenomenon
of lethal hypothermia" by M. A. Rothschild and
V. Schneider
International Journal of Legal Medicine, 1995

On Christopher Knight

The Stranger in the Woods by Michael Finkel, 2017

On Laura Ingalls Wilder

Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography by Laura Ingalls Wilder, 2014

"Robbins children" by Nancy S. Cleaveland
PioneerGirl.com

On things preserved in ice

"What the Arctic reveals about coronavirus" by Mia Bennett
ArcticToday, March 23, 2020

"5,300 Years Ago, Ötzi the Iceman Died. Now We Know His Last Meal."
by Maya Wei-Haas
National Geographic, July 12, 2018

On freezing as a medical procedure

"How the New Science of Freezing Can Save Your Life" by Rene Ebersole
Outside, January 13, 2016

On coughing up your own larynx

Mountains of the Mind by Robert Macfarlane, 2003

On permafrost

"Svalbard, Norway: The island where no one is allowed to die, or give birth" by Kerry van der Jagt
Stuff, May 13, 2018

"The Bizarre Bank Robbery That Shook an Arctic Town" by David Kushner
Outside, January 13, 2020

"The Big Thaw" by Diana Magnay
Sky News, August 20, 2021

On Antarctica

"The Ice Inferno" by Stephen J. Pyne
Aeon, January 11, 2013

On the coldness of the universe

"The Coldest Place in the Universe" by Tom Shachtman
Smithsonian, January, 2008

"Even At Its End, The Universe Will Never Reach Absolute Zero" by Ethan Siegel
Forbes, Nov 12, 2020

THE FUTURE OF WRITING ABOUT GAMES

On Games Writing

"White Supremacy, Black Liberation, and the Power Dynamics of Gun Violence" by Yussef Cole
Vice, March 19, 2018

"INFINITYBLADE" by J. Nicolas Geist
Kill Screen, May 20, 2011

"Games Criticism is a Kindness" by Harper Jay
Kotaku, May 7, 2020

"Last of Us Part II is Great, but Can't Escape Its Father's Shadow" by Julie Muncy
Wired, June 12, 2020

"Broken People, Broken Worlds" by Carolyn Petit
Medium, June 29, 2020

"DED LED" by Dan Solberg
Itch.io

BACKERS

TJ

Sam Porter

LordWaifu

Marty Greer

Benjamin Ebell

Currie La Vedrine

David Esra John

George Kennon Lancon

Artur Derlatka

Eilidh and Fraser Macdonald

Ryan Rogers

Pablo C Alarcon

Legend of Hayden

Arvand Abadie

Nickom Jaap

Tariq 'rust' Hassan

Jesse "Zakum" Richardson

Jake Quinn

Michael Kucek

William Shirras

Mili & Matthew

Emmett Watkins Jr AKA Ejsponge61

Emily Rose

Ollie Clay

Tuan

Jericho Sol Savage

Valeria Rivera

Luke B.

Primrose

talia raine

Leah Seymour

Genna Boehm

Hayden

David Silberman

Andrew Ceco

Emma Saboureau

Thomas Low Sternberg

Saturn Costarella

Parker Aaron

Ray Thomas

Dru

Forrest Robert Empey-Kohl

Keira Monahan

Jonathan Correia

Jack McGowan

Justin Patriquin

Fern Scolpino

Duke of Bees

Elliot Williams

Jordan LaRose

Gavin Felan

Norapat Rerngkasetkig

Kjell Inge Vaage Espeland

Noah Feingold

Till Finke

Nicolas Osuna Villarroel

Jasper Bartram-Hutchison

Stephen Null

Brógán Burke

Daniel Specht

Frank Wildenburg

Jacob & Billy

Ashton Hyatt

Leigh Grubbs

Yuuki Mizoguchi

Ryan Quiambao

Sam Coons

Glen West

Lucas Jay Bernal Lanier

Atticus-Kirby Stewart

Rob Simpson

Maik Hannemann

Jan-Martijn

Judas Escariot

Nate Myren

Kurt

Anthony D. King

Genesis Llewellyn

Drew Hill

Justin D Nickerson

Ovi Samsa

Austin Gonzalez

Jamie Moseley

Noah Druckrey-Sexton

Alan Bosley

Lorelei Remi Joslin

Henry Ander

Con C Bourff

Trey Kline

RITZu/Face__Hole

Jared DeLaTorre/Codex

Alex M

Dena Strong

Nicky Taylor

Micah Roberts (X O F)

Jonathon Hoerner

Dominic Snyder

Kevin Justus

Hugo Caille

Jess Johnson

piggyapocalypse

Colm Seeley

Bennett Mullozzi

D'Vore May: Deracho

Dr. Biggs, PhD

Eric Hamilton Schneider

Walter Donnellan

John Longtin

Tzvi Jasper

Miguel Junior Cruz

Faye Core

Quinn Quimby

Louis Parkinson-Sykes

Rachel Clough

Michelangelo Rodriguez

Andrew Goschke

David Robillard

Marlene McGraw

raychleXconnor <3 haha loser i love you

Emma Best

Morgan Beckley

Alex Houchins

Astra Ice

Gritty

Isabel Koval

Charlie Stark

George Rohac

Seneca Kier

SeRGioPRoXy

Robert James Huff

Johannes Klaus

Samuel Jackson

Rune Varkevisser

Jacob McConnell

Lukas Hegner

bugobmr

Anna Russell

fleurdeliser & frequentlybees

Kit C. New

Kadin 'Blurry' Napoli

David Hartley

Florian Häfner

Michael Bikovitsky

Jackson Foster

Daniel Blee

Jacob R West

Jaina McNamara

Ellysia Bowen

Emil Olin

Ryan Fargusson

Alex Muntean

kit Geraghty

Chris Libor

Suzanne Glémot

Rose

Quinn Ambrosius

Mason Loeffler

Matt and Hannah Wilson

Caio Millecco Ribeiro

Bea Stewart

James Johnston

Alexander Emme

Yoav Zack

Jade Dotson

Mason Seay

Pedro Sarmento

Paul Rigby

Cam D. F.

Daniel "Fintago" Gore

awildbrysen

KieranRJC

Matthew Fullelove

Luke "Horse Choker" Reeves

Eugene Myers

Spencer Henwood

Turmakion

Medea Gospodnetich

Noah DaWinkli

Gwen Rosas

Bebop

Aedan Johnston

Chullain Boulware-Hannig

Nick Hall

Brandon Badger

dFour

Ethan M. Grissom

Caitlin Cavallaro

Oscar Bazaldua (O.B.)

Nelson Tiago Remoaldo de Oliveira

Liam Haskill

Carlos E. Berdeguer-Díaz

Sean Emmett Thompson

Joey Caplan

Andrew Jiang

Alisha Wheeler

Andy Randell

Vincent Ng

pineconeTV

Leif Philp

Matthew Brooks

Ian Thompson

Joshua Ebel

Lawrence Văn Lê

Filip Schwarz

Ray Cohen

Sam Trenery

Sébastien Reese

Allie O'Connor

faelsafe - Hayes Mitzel

Christopher Tammes

T.K.Valentine

John Worcester

Joshua Hammer

Dylan Zengota

Regina Gopon

Adi May Soke

Rumbleslug

Marvin Vogt

Davy Fontes

Raz Colette Abernethy

Madeline Scott

Rook Feld

Philippe Larochelle

Kyle Fairfax

Lith & Ariane

Joseph Walker

Charles Dalton

Brian LeMaster | Yirzmo

Chase Carnevale

Jade A

Max Paladino

Dagon Kristofer Taffe-Ebanks

Jonah Laramee

Emilina Devorah Milgram

Matt Beane & Kristen Kolakowski

Scott Baron

Gavin Casey

Fletch Fletcher

Otto Allard

Matt McDaniel

Hansenard Daniel Piou

Taylor Horne

Tri Nguyen

León Bruckböck

Daniel Potter

Alex Steinle

Adam M. Wright

Josh Kimberley

Roman Stromberg

Morgan Shimanek

Bonnie Averett

Howard Song

Wyatt Lee Kjeldahl

Charlotte Lawson

Alexis Tallent

C.M. Carrow

Reuben Seymour

Eric Drake

Frazer McIntosh

J.K. Zimmerman

Yoonha Lee Jang

Nathan Lachner

Trigg nathaniel solbakken

Andrew Christensen

Quinn Ingram

Nick Boles

Jerry Pinefeld

Jarred Madero

Siobhan Lavinia

William Barnard IV

Chris Grassi

Llewellyn Drew Mocke

Adam Longhofer

Sen Szeto

Evan Harris

Noah Kadish

Monika Salvato

Gordon Emmerson

Joshua Lawson

Josh Domanski

Ani

Florian Brühl

Cole Kraten

Sarthak Negi

Kate Hemingway &
   Karina Zikan

sven lucke

Caleb Kurdydyk

Philip Daniel Stojanovic

Will Wargrave

Maffo

Steven & Adreana :)

Nicholas M.

Craig Stuart

Spiros & Rea
   Papanikolaou

Jonathan W

SFAM Brouwer

Jamie Jablonka

Theta Oosterbaan

Jonathan Easton

Petar Paradžik

Ellie Campbell

Alexander Basden

Kevin Xu

Camden Mookhoek

Chris Haider

Maddux K. Manning -
   "Agrippa"

Gurneel Kang

Riley Burns & Emily
   Barnhart

Jake "aeipathy" Vaughan

jana h-s

Khyberpunk

Tom Sinclair

Jacob Trudeau

Accord Ayre

Cam Luu

Lee Huber

Kevin Chakkalapadickal
   Johnson

James Morrison

True Mr. Foot

David Bourdet

William F. Mercado

WornKnight

Andrew Sink

Casey Ware

Leo Minelli

Xandra

Léo Daugareil

Lewis Webster

Jen Valentine

Rowan P

Martin Ammer

Arnold Smithson

Ronan Kelly

Antonio Rivera

Edward Newton

Nicholas/Natalie Misa

Jesse Oberon

Draconis Eltanin

🌙

Griffin Yu

Callum George

Booker Rothenberg

Greg Miller

ross 'n osseum

Kevin Sonntag

Giordano Ierna

Damien Puente

Grant Parks

Era.

Zach Molnar

Dylan J. Maida

Bryson Perkins

Kevin J. Helock

Nikolas Ehm ehm.
   education

Justin Vu

Osbaldo Martinez

Tyler E. Haddad

Zach Lang

Alex Nevling

Kyle D Geist

Katie Murray

Hunter Harbin

Darragh Domican-Boylan

Jacob (The Hebrew
   Hammer) Lieber

Hussein Yasser Mohamed

Éabha McBride

Collin Wandsnider

Amelia Sims

Urstronaut

Mark Boltz

Alyssah Paccoud &
   Dylan Fender

Christian DiModica

Tommy Sievert

Rocco Buffalino

Stephen LeRoy Hanson

Chloe Brooks-Noriega

C.S. Kim

Bee

Peter Tomasic

Mille Smedegaard
   Bærentzen

Abigail Springer-Jurcak

Vargamor Acedia
   Lycegenes

Dylan Ratner

Sasha AKA
   HadesSerpent01

Mike Reads The World

Jonas Madsen

Allie Malina Pasinski

Daniel Robert Croxton

Sophie Martin

Anita Kärkkäinen

Philip Sayers

Melvil Joyaux

Richard "Revie" Pettersen

Jacob DeCampi

Dirk Hamel

Scott Dagen

Ethan R. Aguilar

Moka 'Kiki' Devs

Andreaus Colon

Emmett Hulser-Morris

Artemis Kane

The Leastings

Oliver Mansfield

Josh DelaCruz

Mikaela Ariane Shields

Nate Myren, haunted by
   visions of half-beard
   Geller

Eliza Joy

Angie Peng

Marco Adriel Muñoz

Kenny

Carlos "Duckz" Medina

Michael Junker

Will M. Judas

William Henry Lett

Paula Koch

Luke Richardson-Foulger

Calvin DeLay

Quentin Müller-Kallweit

Fiona Parker Lennox

Leander Faber

Yoshimi-Theophile

Nathan Yoder

Owen Vandevelde

Rod_Shark (Lonely Air)

Rose Ott

a_rabidcow

William Ray Dawson

Lars.Dunwich

潘舒维 · Sophia Pan

ZoraGB

Mihkkal Karpoff

Pascal Morello

Florence Mulligan

Marco Nicole Congote

Arachne Pastuszka

Seth & Pili

Tanner Shaw

FaketoastFT

Diego Gil Luengo

Alexander I. Lee

Dhaval Patel

Ethan D.

Weava

Bee Baldoz-Fenner

Sullivan ROUAUD

Timothy Cockcroft

James Anema

Phoebe Clarke

Maxwell Wenzel

Natalie Martin

Rory Hoeschen

Noah Cahn

Patrick Roddy

Ashley Trinh

David Sharp

Jack Kershaw-Dann

Kyle Ramey

Pascal Fasching

Ricky Chen

Alex Ridal

Jacob Sandoval

Dylan O'Laughlin

Andrew Han

Kadir Marangoz

Carter Anderson

Summer Smith

Clint Bohn

Scott Bennett

Oliver Kurz

Jack M Slinger

Brandon Grindle

Tobias Egold

Elijah Maldonado

Patrick Philbin

Jay Dragon

Jan-Bart De Muelenaere

Jessica Rubel

Matthew Wilson

Robert Bradvica

Thomas Jack

Alex Troesch

Robin Lasne

Maxwell Olson

Kareem Abdol-Hamid

Meredith Harris

Kevin Heuer

Jasper Markowicz

Zane Erickson

Gabriel Napolitano

Bobby Roth

Ben Pike

Thomas Young

Kaitlyn Campbell

L Matthews

Matthew Machado

Ian McCollum

Jack Weil

Joshua Carpenter

Matt McDougall

Thorben Sanz Karl

Nicholas Parsons

Destiny Jacobs

Andrew Pittman

LauraJane Libkie

Bryant Taylor

Sam Rawding

Philippa Straus

carlo mogavero

Aaron Garcia

Lee Bosch

Austin Asbury

Jack Rich

Riley Kastner

Noah Laney

Keegan Chua

KATY KELLY

Lauren Van Horn

lee lemar

Kalen Austin

Vighnesh Sivakumar

Jeff Peppler

Travis Horlacher

Emily Schallock

Andrew King

John Ault

Brittany Gillespie

Vsevolod Khusid

Claire la fontaine

Liam Yule

Elliott Clark

Jennifer Thakar

Danielle Schmidt

Jarrett Kleitz

Matti Hansen

Justin Collini

Carlos Villarreal-Elizondo

Alfredo Del Castillo

Nathan Foulsham

Jean-Romain Roy

Zachary Harris

Charlie Bonner-Davies

Cooper Jones

Elona Behnke

Nathan Moran

Bryan Schwaba

Nikita Obnosov

Christopher Blum

Nathalie Odom

Isaac Hall

Harry Jones

Alina Mendoza

Matthew Nicholson

Riley Stone

Spencer Christiano

Daniel Murphy

Cameron Frederiksen

Clementine Stone

Draven Prior

Maddie Kay

Jonathan Xu

Grant Walker

Trevor Ralph

Miguel Lopez

Carter Hulse

Rick Shelton

Bradley Butler

Michael Levine

Aaron Potter

Chelsea Gerkens

Eden Meriles

Isaac Gooch

Michael McCallum

Jessica Shepard

Asif Sattar

sivan feitelson

Alve Henriksson

Leon Schöley

Kevin Williams

Jonathan Oancea

Nicole Holbein

Marley Johnson

Samantha Belt

Wesley Tsai
Siddharth Singh
Michael Williams
Zayn Shourbaji
Joshua Gilks
Matthew Cleveland
Alexander Diaz
Kyle Jurik
Nate Moody
Ryan Nix
Brendan Myers
Ashe Erivez
Carly Foy
Dylan Baker
Ben Harris
Maximilian Dolberg
August Amos
Evan Fulton
Riley Zook-Moran
Joel Hopkins
Matthew Sommers
Faith Freeman
Charles Hurtt
Thomas Connors
Johnny Velez
Harrison Seitz
GEOFFREY HAGBERG
Shawn Covell
Renzo Nevarez
Wvaldo Mendoza
Danny Taylor
Nathan Andersen
John Herd
Ariella Rovinsky
Tyson Newton
E. GO
Onnolee Wierson
Chris Crowell
Robert Nerup Jørgensen

Austin Walker
Matthew Nagy
Lukas Smith
Benjamin Hubner
Torben Rehmke
Cadence Pinck
Caleb Ashby
Pharaoh Lamothe
Jared Bass
Aaron Pullen
Aleksander Selway
Rylan Valentine
Lara Meußer
Jack Millar
Michael Notkin
Steve Gutierrez
Alex Serck
Philipp-Jan Henke
Jakob Underwood
Angela Hawkins
John Woolley
Ava Harrow
Ty McGee
Cheryl McVickar
Christian Meffert
Teegan Waggoner
Hayden McMullin
Renee Harmon
Anna Maughan
Ryan D'Arcy-Irwin
Thom Gisser
Kass Vivenzio
Kate Bui
Brendin Barone
Gilles Fischer
Ian Lloyd
Ayden Whitney
Tegan Nolte
Keenan Duran

Joanny Raby
Finn Ickler
Hunter Wills
Noah Sherrill
Adam Lewis
Astor Sporre
Mark Ortiz
John Vernon Yalong
Sam Aston
Casey Baldwin
Brian Seaman
Owen Kitle
Jacob Gregory Dammons
Matthew Crowley
Antoine Kammer-Mayer
Donald Norlander
David Pagliughi
Orion Prescott
Zachary Hinds
alexander peters
Jackson Streeter
Travis Jenkins
Jasper Cuomo
Matthew Bongart
Steven Valera
Lindsay Lutz
James Hannah
Haley MacLean
ELIZABETH Narvaez
Ethan Lynch
Jake Fearon
Milan Mrdenovic
Josef Kersche
Valerie Shangarpawar
Justin Cabral
Anthony Castellaneta
Alexia Boucher
Michael Fattori
Jon Johnston

Brent Clower
Luke Zergiebel
Nicholas Handy
Vincent Bian
Sam de Luche
Jonah Severn
Jordan Klaas
Samuel Watson
Imad Lababidi
Ramon Schärer
Charlie Addicott
Niklas Kladroba
Cameron Powell
Jace Reyes
Sam Dawson
Jasmine Rowe
Jose Enrique Ramones
    Freites
Alice Angeline
Aric Rhodes
Grayson Leak
Sophi Seley
Aleksander Oehlberg
Teldo Kasper Neto
Corey Dudek
Patrick Smith
Seth Maldonado
Brian Schmidt
Cassidy Wells
Joshua Pryde
Liam Bennett
Cameron Pinard
Nicholas Alger
Nicolas Silva
David Tauzin
Erslan Salman
Rebecca Samaniego
Christian Thorpe
Joe Taylor

Jake Kurzer

Lorelei Witwer

Liisbet Leemets

Miles Fluitt

Gaylen Bailey

Amelia Stone

Chris Yee

Madinah Vaden

Cyril Alinsub

Sebastian Perfecto

Elias Fain

Corbin Banks

Sera Li

Tim Draeger

June Thorne

Alexandre Assaf

Zachary Adams

Bastiaan Struik

Kylie Brophy

Marius de Vries

Michael Waring

Jacob Tolliver

Nathan Calapine

Colin Lorang

Tristan Sheehan

Antony Ahmed

Thomas Dumbleton

Gus Eggerud

David Coleman

Connor Smith

Nicole Milan

Owen Collins

Nicolas Keck

Ness Weatherford

Daniel Russell

Ellia Morse

Randall Donaghy

Noah Merrell

Erwin Burema

Andrew Brown

Nicholas Hoff

Peter Schack-Nielsen

Henry Luong

Niels Knudsen

Ryan Kelly

Marina Battistini

Ethan Garcia

Zachary Tellman

Jacob Haller-Roby

Kaiyah Taylor

Mercedes Vinson

Michael Maciaszek

Alexandra Jones

Damien Burns

Isabelle Gleaves

Tyler Nam

Ronald Agyepong

Andrew Clark

Ryan Mock

Hunter Miller

Eric Biskupski

Calliope Verdell

Andy Zhang

Kristopher Bond-Cote

Spencer Peairs

Wilfred Vernon

Kathryn Gudgeon

Inez Washington

Joseph Palfini

Cam Fawcett

Joshua Koeser

Dylan Eveland

Zach Phillips

Conrad Janzen

Matt Piedra

Nathan Heideman

Paul Vine

Fred Barthel

Alison Amery-Zwartz

Michał Wójtowicz

Mariel Holm

Glenn Rattell

Jack Beeken

Chris Muller

kyle riper

Jesse Mayan

Fabian Amels

Benjamin Peresie

Michael Kreinbring

Joao Gabriel

Kyla Church

Matteo Bennardis

Isaac Walters

Milan Hutten

Callum Billington

Matthew Murry

Lydia Kagele

Raido Everest

Georgia McLeland

Tyler Brewer

Raymon Osentoski

Yasin Tella

Aubrey Hernandez

Jacob Davis

Ashwini M

Daniel Brier

Patrick Newman

Wren O'Regan

Ethan Hart

Aren Harper

Isabel Berard

Viktor Munson

Hailey Goudreau Gregg

Miles Kohler

Liam Costello

Kevin Copson

Justin Konyn

Alex Lamont

Kevin Schletz

Luke Barrile

Max Richards

Noah Keefe

Stuart Thomson

Charlie Luke

Paxton Rutledge

Ian Cole-Carlo

James Sisodiya

Paul Cawston

Robert Falk

Mia Smithson

Pedro Lima

Abilio Carvalho

Sebastian Sosa-Perez

Gerardo Gordillo

eva levin

Adam Bryant

Joseph Williams

Vivian Kennedy

Nicholas DelGaudio

Sarah Spence

Archie Bower

Zeke Tarasenko

Gail Lueker

Bella Campbell

Hugo Pereira

William Johnston

Jackson Birdwell

Kadin Heid

Anthony Dungan

Karen Rosenow

Morgan Bancroft

Gian-Luca Kuoni

Thomas Daniels

Emil Head

David Sargeant

Haakon Helmer-Larsen

Jonathan Wilson

Max Grim

Nicholas Blando

Shira Hanovich

Neal-Sebastian Rabjohns

Florian Gagel

Rodrigo Guerra

Jaylee Ashbourne

William Brady

Natalie Scott

Danielle Johanna Hansen

Michael Brennen

Jackson Sargent

Benjamin Nelson

J. Karter Kotz

Ripley Smith

Ethan Schisel

Bozhidar Borisov

Lewis Burdett

J Golec

Sebastian Tabit

Chad Bruggemann

Kellen Vogelfanger

Casey Toney

Connor Way

Cat Cao

Lucas Tomes

Lisa Liebel

dan chaney

Rye Marshall

Elias Lindblad

Avril Ayers

Helena Heisser

kira teo

Josh Stern

Johnathan Hanlin

Jack McGuire

Cameron Gordon

Jonathon Mattison

Dakota Bennett

Robert Serkus

Corey White

Max Robertson

Andrew Creel

Hugh Tully

Anahi Prolongeau

Matt Youngs

Richard Gairing

Connor Hagman

Devin Brooks

Riley Ramos

Kiet Ho

Leonard Spelbrink

Kevin Colburn

Seungwoong Ha

Martha Anderson

Noah Kaner

Timothy Raaijmakers

Nicolas Rego

Rich McLaughlin

Elizabeth He

David Morell

Ayse Simsek

Ian Baartman

Thomas Dempsey

Sarah Trollinger

Abel mazariegos

Thomas Storer

Zane Brown

Trevor Bolton

Atle Heigre

Brent Ahuriri

Dmytro Onysko

Ira Libby

David Goh

Joseph Wysk

Dalton Wilson

Jakob Matteo Isele

Jessa Laboissonniere

Jarred Golden

George Callihan

jeremy koskamp

Jacob Phillips

Robin Ren

Justin Vinson

Eidhneán Ní Laoghaire
    Is Gairbhith

Elijah Kliot

WILLIAM SMART

Bob Goodrich

Bogdan Shapovalov

Mathias Plans

Sean McC

Scott Williamson

Michael Collins

Kassandra Johnson

Keith Ryan

Tyler Neuer

Lance Parrish

Eric Eghigian

Andrew Kokemoor

Ben Whitney

Ann Nielsen

Stephanie Johnstone-
    Laurette

Joshua Isaacs

Parker Yarasitis

Harrison Cordle

Ates Dosluoglu

CREDITS

Writer
Jacob Geller

Creative Director and Lead Designer
Annie Maynard

Cover Artist
Kilian Eng

Contributing Writers
Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah
Ian Danskin
Renata Price
Gareth Damian Martin
Jamil Jan Kochai
Chris Plante
Matt Margini
Bijan Stephen
Andrew Geller
Noah Caldwell-Gervais
Blake Hester
James Docherty

Editor
Blake Hester

Additional Editing
Abram Buehner
Peg Carlson
Lena Geller
Chris Schilling

Project Manager
Ewan Wilson

Art Director
Stephen Maurice Graham

Lost in Cult Creative Director
Jon Doyle

Lost in Cult Design Director
Rachel Dalton

Printing & distribution
Trento

Typefaces
New Atten
Miller Text
Kaneda Gothic

A special thanks to Stuart Coote.

PUBLISHER

ANNIE MAYNARD
Creative Director

Annie Maynard is an art director whose career has spanned higher education, local alt-weekly journalism, and her most recent endeavor: *How A Game Lives*. A long-time arts enthusiast, she dabbles in making anthropomorphic food illustrations and fostering community at a monthly event for local creatives. When she's not creating, she's honing her skills as an amateur gardener and expert-ish home chef in Durham, North Carolina.

KILIAN ENG
Cover Artist

Kilian Eng was born 1982 in Stockholm, Sweden. He is best known for his detailed and colourful sci-fi and fantasy-inspired artwork. He mainly works with alternative movie posters and record covers, but also spends a significant time on personal projects, which are sometimes released as art prints. His designs blend digital art with traditional techniques, exploring futuristic landscapes and imaginative realms where large scale environments often play a big role.